



I saw your travel account and at once went through it with enthusiasm and emotion. For reading Amritlal Vegad, no effort is required. The narrative is fantastic. What can one say about those Dilwara rocks, engraved by nature; the one-meal traveller by foot after his breakfast was spoiled by dogs; that naked hermit; that junior Dhuadhar. Blessed are those self-dependent students, their cold wars and treaties and blessed is your Akbari-Birbali lamplight bath.

Yours is the real flame of determination, proving that whatever be the trouble, a man can fight it, and raise the light of his soul higher – he can drive away not only the cold but also the soul's depression. Jay ho! Jay ho! (Victory! Victory!) to the ever-burning 'flame' of this Ganga's son, this Bhishma-like, Narmada's ascetic devotee.

– Ramesh Chandra Shah

*Excerpted from his letters of appreciation to Amritlal Vegad*

This is Amritlal Vegad's second book in a remarkable trilogy in which he records his circumambulation of the magnificent Narmada River. Here, the award-winning author and artist continues his compelling account of the 2,624 kilometre journey by foot over a 22 year period.



Blending his keen powers of observation with his artist's eye and irresistible story-telling skills, he unfolds the many moods of the iconic river, the unforgettable scenes and sights along its banks, and the colourful cast of characters he comes across. His vivid narration not only makes the reader his eager travelling companion, but draws attention to a host of intriguing aspects of the journey that a casual traveller might otherwise miss.

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# NARMADA RIVER OF JOY



Amritlal Vegad



Narmada: River of Joy

# Narmada

## River of Joy

Amritlal Vegad



Translated from the original in Hindi by

Marietta Maddrell



**BANYAN TREE**



## NARMADA: RIVER OF JOY

Amritlal Vegad

First published in English 2014

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We strongly believe that '*nothing can be taught*' and that '*work is the best teacher*'.

## Author



**Amritlal Vegad** is an artist and an award-winning author in Hindi and Gujarati. Hailing from the village of Madhapur in Kutch in the state of Gujarat, he went on to study at the prestigious Visva Bharati University at Shantiniketan under the famous artist from the Bengal School, Nandlal Bose. He lives in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, not far from the banks of the Narmada River. A teacher by profession, he taught at the Institute of Fine Arts in Jabalpur.

Amritlal Vegad's deep attachment to the Narmada resulted in his parikrama (pilgrimage) of the 1,312 kilometre-long river, which he began in 1977. He was then 49 years old. He undertook the parikrama, which requires walking the full circuit on both banks of the river, in sections over a period of 22 years. He was 71 when he completed his epic walk in 1999. If one includes his walks along the tributaries of the Narmada, he has actually done a total of 4,000 kilometres on foot. His wife Kanta gave him full support in his mission and even accompanied him on occasion.

Amritlal Vegad drew on his consummate skills as an artist and a writer to record the sights, sounds, characters and experiences he encountered during his Narmada walks. He wrote a trilogy, originally in Hindi and Gujarati. These were Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada ('Narmada: River of Beauty'), Amrutsya Narmada ('Amrit's Narmada', which has been translated into this book and renamed 'Narmada: River of Joy') and Teere Teere Narmada ('On the Banks of the Narmada'). His books have also been translated into Marathi, Bengali and English.

With his keen artist's eye, his sensitive understanding, his perceptive power and his creative pen which often lifts his prose into poetry, Amritlal Vegad has brought the Narmada and the scenes along the river banks to vivid life. He has also preserved for posterity the natural splendour of the river, and all the colourful aspects of life on the banks, some of which are disappearing due to developmental activity.

Working with pen-and-ink sketches, Amritlal Vegad's art works focus on the Narmada and include a unique collection of paper collages. Some of



his delicately-drawn yet evocative sketches have illustrated his books on the Narmada.

Amritlal Vegad was honoured with the Sahitya Academy Award for Gujarati literature and the Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan Award for Hindi literature for his *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada*. He is also the recipient of the Madhya Pradesh Rajya Sahitya Award and the Rashtrapati Award for his other works.

Today, as an environmental activist, Amritlal Vegad continues his lifelong commitment to the Narmada and other rivers of Madhya Pradesh. He is the President of Narmada Samagra, an organisation working against pollution in the rivers, and improving the sanitation and the facilities on the waterfronts and the banks.



### Translator

**Marietta Maddrell** left England in 1982 and travelled widely in Asia. She taught English at Lhasa in Tibet and in Hong Kong. Arriving in India, she decided to make it her home and adopted the Indian way of life, renaming herself 'Mira'. While on her own parikrama of the Narmada, she met the author Amritlal Vegad, and was therefore uniquely suited to understand the subject matter of his books on the Narmada. Not surprisingly, she has infused the translation in English with the same spirit as the author did in the original in Hindi. The author has in fact written about her in a section of this book.



### The Normal Sequence of the Narmada Parikrama

From Nareswar (Gujrat) to Gwarighat, Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh) parikrama was not in order (successive). Had they been in order (one after another) then they must have been like this:

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Nareswar to Moriya                 | 2. Moriya to Kolamba                      |
| 3. Kolamba to Hatnisangam             | 4. Hatnisangam to Dharmपुर                |
| 5. Dharmपुर to Maheswar               | 6. Maheswar to Chaubis Avtar              |
| 7. Chaubis Avtar to Dhavrikund        | 8. Dhavrikund                             |
| 9. Dhavrikund to Barksar              | 10. Barksar to Nilkanth                   |
| 11. Nilkanth to Pathora               | 12. Pathora to Joshipur                   |
| 13. Joshipur to Sardarnagar           | 14. Sardarnagar to Mangrol                |
| 15. Mangrol to Mauni Mata's Ashram    | 16. Mauni Mata's Ashram to Karaundi       |
| 17. Karaundi to Barman Ghat           | 18. Barman Ghat to Kerpani                |
| 19. Kerpani to Hirapur                | 20. Hirapur to Jhansighat                 |
| 21. Jhansighat to Bheraghat           | 22. Bheraghat: Marble Rocks and Dhuandhar |
| 23. Bheraghat to Gwarighat (Jabalpur) |   |

[illegible]

1	Barman Ghat to Kerpani	1
2	Kerpani to Hirapur	7
3	Hirapur to Jhansighat	13
4	Chaubis Avtar to Dhavrikund	19
5	Dhavrikund	26
6	Dhavrikund to Barkesar	33
7	Barkesar to Nilkanth	42
8	Nilkanth to Pathora	52
9	Pathora to Joshipur	59
10	Joshipur to Sardarnagar	66
11	Sardarnagar to Mangrol	74
12	Mangrol to Mauni Mata's Ashram	81
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## Narmada

**The Narmada River** is the traditional water boundary between the north and the south of the Indian sub-continent. The fifth-largest river in India, the Narmada flows 1,312 kilometres in the rift formed by the two mountain ranges that run across central India: the Vindhyas to the north, and the Satpuras to the south. Her journey begins in Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh; she then flows westwards via the state of Maharashtra to the coast of Gujarat, west of the city of Bharuch, emptying into the Gulf of Khambat. From a trickle at the source, the Narmada expands into a mighty 20-kilometre wide body of water at the estuary.

All along her course, the Narmada offers numerous fine vistas, some of them breathtaking in their unspoilt beauty. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that she is the only sacred river in India that is circumambulated (walked around in worship). Legend says that the Narmada never married, and being a virgin, is held to be more scared than even the Ganga, the most important of India's five holiest rivers. The prescribed period for the Narmada parikrama (pilgrimage) is three years, three months and 13 days. The full circuit, up and down the entire length of her banks, is 2,624 kilometres.

Hailed as the eternal Mother, the Narmada is always referred to in the feminine gender. The name 'Narmada' translates into 'Giver of Joy'.



who was undertaking the *parikrama* alone? Neither have you turned 75, nor do you have to travel alone. So stop making excuses and leave immediately!"

My stubborn mind was not so easily won over. "Everyone doesn't have the same physique," it pointed out. "That man was so strong, even at 75. How can you compare yourself with him? Whatever you set out to do, you must do only after careful consideration."

My heart became enraged at my mind's timid words: "careful consideration". Impatiently it said, "You don't need to do each and every thing after 'careful consideration'! You are not merely an intellectual being—you are also an emotional being. In fact, your whole life is guided by emotions."

My mind's grip on its point of view began to weaken. My heart was clearly winning the argument. "I've decided," I announced. "Whatever happens, I'm going."

My mind gave up, but could not resist making a suggestion: "All right, if you insist, then go. I won't stop you. According to the decree, you are supposed to walk from Nareswar in Gujarat to Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. Instead, why don't you cover the shorter distance from Barman<sup>2</sup> Ghat<sup>3</sup> (which is much nearer home) to Jabalpur? See how it goes. You can easily return home in an emergency. Don't insist on doing the journey in a particular sequence." This was a reasonable suggestion and even my heart had no objection.

This time, on my resumed journey, I had the company of three art students. There was Arun Dubey, the son of a wealthy farming family from a village near Benaras. Handsome and fit, Arun was physically very strong. His father had wanted him to stay home to supervise the family farms. But Arun's interest lay in the arts, so he ran away from home and came to Jabalpur. With too much self-respect to borrow money from his father, Arun supported himself while studying. He got by through the day with just a few cups of tea. At 11 o'clock each night, he would begin cooking a meal in his hostel-room, managing to eat only by midnight.

When I remarked, "This habit of yours is really weird," he had a ready rejoinder with this story: "There are weirder students than me at my hostel. One guy sleeps so much that he just can't wake up before 10 in the morning. One day, some students at the hostel carried him, fast asleep, on

his string-cot out into the street. They tied coconuts to the four legs of the bed, lit incense sticks and told the passers-by: 'A poor student at the hostel has died. He has no relatives here. Please donate something for his last rites.' In no time, the students collected 250 rupees. Abandoning their sleeping friend, they happily took off to the coffee house. A while later, an ear-shattering horn from a passing truck startled the boy awake. The 'dead body' then rose, and returned to the hostel carrying his cot. That wasn't the end of the story. The boy went right back to sleep and woke up only after 10 o'clock! Such are the heroes who live in our hostel!"

The other two students who were to accompany us were Sujeet and Chandrakant. Both had also undertaken the responsibility of paying their own way through college.

On October 30, 1996, the four of us arrived at Barman Ghat at 10 o'clock in the morning. I had been there once before when I had stayed for a fortnight. This time around, it felt like a homecoming.

The river Narmada lies far below Barman and can only be reached by descending innumerable steep steps cut into the hillside. Involuntarily, the thought came to me: once down, would I be able to climb back up those steps?

I did what I had to do. I went down the steps all the way to the river bank and greeted the Narmada with great respect. "Mother, I am guilty," was all I could say in humble apology for my long absence. With intense yearning, I looked around the valley. Then, very slowly, I began the arduous climb back up again. When I finally reached the top, I was certainly panting a bit, but not too much. My fears evaporated. I was now convinced: 'I will surely be able to undertake this journey.'

We left Barman late that same afternoon. After a two-kilometre walk, we reached a road bridge that spanned the Narmada. This area is called 'Satdhara', which means 'Seven Streams'. It was a place of such great scenic beauty that we decided to stay there itself overnight. The loveliness of the Narmada here was further enhanced as she flowed swiftly between the rocks. It was such a compelling sight that we kept gazing at the rushing river until daylight deepened into dusk.

We then returned to our hut and unpacked our cooking pots to prepare dinner. We discovered that by mistake, we had brought along with us a kettle we had borrowed from a watchman in Barman Ghat, to fetch

<sup>2</sup>Barman: A town in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh

<sup>3</sup>Ghat (*ghat*): A flight of steps leading down to a river

water from the Narmada. There was no alternative but to return it immediately. It was an unusually dark night, but as Arun and I walked back to Narmada with the kettle, the headlights of a passing vehicle would light up the road every so now and then so we didn't have too much difficulty in making our way there and back to Satdhara.

The next morning, we set out again, following a path laid along the ridge of the cliff that towered above the Narmada. We passed Beekor and Sagaunghat, and reached Little Dhuandhar at mid-day. Here, we saw countless pretty little waterfalls. At first, as we were approaching from below, we spotted just a few, but as we continued our climb up the rock-face many more waterfalls revealed themselves. It was an ideal spot to bathe and cook lunch. We lingered by those waterfalls for a long time. Listening to their constant roar was immensely pleasurable.

The Narmada flows mainly over a bed of soil and sand, but now and then she makes her way between protruding rocks. As at Satdhara, the rocks and rapids at Little Dhuandhar certainly made their presence felt. The Narmada tumbled over the rocks, creating a series of little waterfalls. Here she jumped, there she somersaulted and occasionally she executed handsprings against the unyielding stone. This lively stretch of the river could well be termed 'Narmada's Gym'. Not that it was the only one—there were several more 'gyms' along the river's course. Perhaps that was how the Narmada stayed so vivacious and cheerful, right from her source to the end of her course where she merged into the sea.

There was a beautiful *ashram*<sup>4</sup> perched on a little hill beside Dhuandhar. The attending *sadhu*<sup>5</sup> had earned a good reputation as an *ayurvedic*<sup>6</sup> doctor. Below the *ashram* was a vantage point from which all the rapids could be seen at once. This was the best place to take a 'family photograph' of the Narmada and her offspring, the rapids.

In the evening we arrived at Gursi. We stayed the night at the *dharmshala*,<sup>7</sup> which was looked after by a live-in caretaker.

"Do you have any firewood?" we asked him.

<sup>4</sup>*ashram*: A hermitage; a place of religious retreat for Hindus

<sup>5</sup>*sadhu*: A Hindu ascetic, a holy man

<sup>6</sup>*ayurvedic*: The word is the adjectival form of *ayurveda*, an ancient Indian science of healing. *Ayurveda* uses herbs, minerals, water, yoga and meditation among other means of remedy. This traditional form of healing is considered to be an alternative to conventional allopathic practice

<sup>7</sup>*dharmshala*: a religious sanctuary; a resthouse for pilgrims

"Aahanh boss!" His "aahanh" meant "no".

When we located some firewood, we asked him: "May we cook your meal too?"

"Aahanh, boss! I've cooked mine already."

The next morning, we forged ahead, following a trail through fields of *jowar*<sup>8</sup> and *bajra*<sup>9</sup>. It was a delight to see the full ears of both the grain variants, a sight we might well have missed had we taken the usual route—the pathway along the riverbank below.

We reached Kerpani in the afternoon and arrived at the *dharmshala*, settling ourselves in the verandah there. I knew that there was an extremely beautiful spot called Putalikhoh, with a mountain stream, seven kilometres from where we were staying. The rocks there are adorned with prehistoric drawings that are about 20,000 years old. Some 20 years ago, I had gone there to see those drawings. One cannot find the place without a local guide. I remembered that there was a primary school nearby. Perhaps, I thought, one of the teachers there might be able to help us.

I went across to the school and started chatting with the teachers. To my surprise, one of them identified himself as my guide on my previous visit back in 1973. He remembered that I had soaked his towel in the nearby spring and wiped the rocks clean with it to reveal the pictures clearly, and that I had then sketched them. I had, in fact, brought along one of my sketches from that previous visit. The date inscribed on it was "16.10.1973". What an amazing coincidence!

The following morning, we set out for Putalikhoh with the same teacher who had earlier been my guide. After about five kilometres, we reached a stream. We walked alongside it, and where it had dried up, we clambered over the rocks on its bed. After another one and a half kilometres, the course of the stream suddenly widened into the shape of a half-moon, and here the water flowed again. On one side of the stream, the bank was a very high vertical rockface.

Putalikhoh offers, in a sense, a scaled-down version of the expansive rock art of the Ajanta Caves<sup>10</sup> in Aurangabad. There is, however, no cave

<sup>8</sup>*jowar*: Sorghum, a type of cereal grain

<sup>9</sup>*bajra*: Pearl millet, also a type of cereal grain

<sup>10</sup>Ajanta Caves: These are 300 rock-cut cave monuments that date back from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, with sculptures and paintings that have been hailed as the finest examples of Buddhist art in India. The Ajanta Caves are a UNESCO World Heritage site

at Putalikhoh; the drawings had been etched on the flaky surface of the rocks by the side of some steps. It took us some time to locate the pictures but, by wiping the rocks with a wet cloth just as I had done 20 years ago, we found them at last.

Today we recognise three basic needs: food, clothing and shelter. The people who lived thousands of years ago had neither clothes nor houses. But they had art! They danced, they sang and they drew pictures. In the life of primitive man, the second priority after food was art. Much later, humankind would learn to weave cloth, construct houses and engage in farming. But first, they learned to create pictures and sculptures. Art was the most ancient skill (after hunting) that man turned his hand to before learning any other.

After exploring Putalikhoh and examining the rock pictures, we returned to Kerpani. We had walked about 15 kilometres on the round trip and were tired, so we decided to spend another night there. But we were less lucky on the second night. While we were sleeping, a dog made off with our bag of snacks. We discovered this only the next morning.

This was a setback. Now we would have to march on empty stomachs. But what good fortune it must have been for that dog! He would not have found such tasty food for days on end. This indeed is the way of the world: one's misery is another's joy. While one is harmed, another benefits; when one loses, another wins; one's bad luck is another's good fortune. Why did the Lord make this the way of the world? Musing about this made me feel sad.

Hoisting the knapsacks on their backs, the students were ready to walk on. So, leaving that sadness behind at the *dharmshala*, I too happily took to the road.



## 2. Kerpani to Hirapur

The Narmada's heart finds little to rejoice in flowing through the plains—there is no challenge, no scope for heroics, and no opportunity to display her courage. She moves along, no doubt, but absent-mindedly and silently. The flat landscape does not appeal to her adventurous nature. In the plains, she glides along the banks, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other. She rarely flows through the centre of her course. Perhaps her father Maikal, when bidding her farewell, advised her: "Go very cautiously my daughter! Don't walk in the middle of the road, stay at the sides." To put it another way, just as we humans shift our weight from one foot to the other as we walk, the river too swings from one bank to the other as it flows along.

The Narmada might be the Mother of millions, but she is first and foremost Maikal's daughter. 'Maikal' is another name for Amarkantak<sup>1</sup>, the source of the Narmada. That is why one of the Narmada's many names is 'Maikal-suta', which means the daughter of Maikal.

<sup>1</sup>Amakantak: The place which is the source of the Narmada. It is located in the Maikal Hills, the meeting point of the two mountain ranges, the Vindhya and the Satpura at the eastern edge of Madhya Pradesh. Amarkantak is a pilgrim town in a natural heritage area



We experienced the fierce cold on the banks of Narmada. The days were burning hot but the nights would become extremely cold. The students worked out a system: all three would sleep huddled together under a single pile of blankets. Invariably, by dawn, there would be a quarrel between the two who slept on the outer edges. One of them would complain to the other, "You pulled all the blankets towards you which left me freezing all night!" and the next day, the other would make the same accusation. This 'cold war' was waged every morning. I too shivered with the cold and couldn't sleep well.

After two nights at Kerpani, we moved ahead the following morning. The path ran along the river's edge, without a single tree for shade. We trudged on, drenched in sweat, until two or three o'clock in the afternoon. We camped in the guest-house of whichever village we found ourselves. Our first task was to search for fuel. We were now eating only one meal a day—in the evening. There was no question of breakfast or snacks. We walked each day on empty stomachs.

The students managed by drinking tea, but I am not a tea-drinker. Instead, I drank plenty of water including, whenever I got the chance, quenching my thirst from the streams along the way. Eating just one meal a day, drinking plenty of water and walking till the mid-afternoon of each day was unexpectedly beneficial.

Back home at Jabalpur, I used to get out of breath merely climbing the stairs. Now, carrying a loaded knapsack on my back, I was climbing up and down the Narmada's steep cliffs several times in the course of the trek without even panting at all. I recalled the adage:

*"You don't die of being on the move; You die of sitting about.  
And you don't even die of sitting about, If you eat sparingly."*

I felt as though I had discovered the panacea for good health: walk a lot, drink plenty of water and eat sparingly! And let's not forget the contribution of the fresh air along the banks of the Narmada! Where can such life-giving clean air be found in our urban metros? Big cities are like gas chambers.

We arrived in Dongargaon, via Murgakhera, that afternoon. We found a guest-house with an available room. There was a *Paramhansi*<sup>2</sup> *sadhu*

<sup>2</sup>*Paramhansi*: A follower of the yogic master, Paramhansa Yogananda. Born as Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1893-1952), he is best known for his classic *Autobiography of a Yogi* and the fact that his body did not decay upon his death

staying in the adjacent room. He touched neither money nor fire. So neither did he light incense sticks nor did he make any offering of light from the oil lamps. At night, he remained in the dark. As he did not have any contact with fire, he could not cook his own food. He therefore went to a farmer's home for his meals and ate only once a day.

The biggest problem on our journey was to source fuel to cook our meals. Cowdung cakes and firewood were hard to find. There was no firewood at Dongargaon either, so we located a house where *sadavrat*<sup>3</sup> was given. The householder willingly gave us some wood and also offered us food. I asked him how long he had been giving *sadavrat* and he replied: "I did the Narmada *parikrama* about 15 years ago. After being given meals by many households, I wanted to give a little in return. So I have been giving *sadavrat* ever since."

As we now had a room to sleep in, we were sheltered from the cold. There was, therefore, no 'cold-war' between the students the next morning. A ceasefire was possible in this case.

We continued our journey the next morning. A village called Rohini appeared. What a sweet name: 'Rohini', the wife of the moon god. But immediately after Rohini came the village of Kuraila—which sounded like *karela*, the bitter gourd. Sweetness and bitterness lay side by side like joy and sorrow, which reside within us like intimate neighbours.

We walked along the riverside as far as Nimkhera. Then we climbed up a steep cliff. There was a cave on the cliffside called the 'Guru Cave'. It is said that Govindpada, the *guru*<sup>4</sup> of the revered sage Adi Shankaracharya, lived here. At the tender age of eight, Shankar had come to Nimkhera from distant Kerala in the south of India, and had studied philosophy for four years with his *guru*. There is an *ashram* nearby which takes care of the cave, so we went there first. The *sadhu* there sent a guide with a torch to show us the interior of the cave.

We reached the cave entrance after squeezing through a very narrow tunnel which was almost 30 metres long, and stopped short at the sight before us.

"Oh Lord!" I exclaimed. "This is amazing! Such smooth rocks!"

<sup>3</sup>*sadavrat*: An offering of food to pilgrims, *sadhus* and the needy. The practice of *sadavrat* was introduced by Jalaram Bapa (1799-1881), by way of thanksgiving for the recovery of his sick son

<sup>4</sup>*guru*: A teacher who is an authority on certain subjects and the repository of great knowledge and wisdom, to whom students commit themselves to learn from and serve

The walls of the cave were lined with a tapestry of rocks, as delicate as fine cloth. Neither flat nor level, they undulated gently: wavy rocks with necklaces of pearls on their crests. Nature had sculpted the rocks into fine garments—perhaps to clothe an ascetic hermit!

From another perspective, the walls of the cave looked as if the waves of the sea had frozen into rock and someone had lifted them up and stuck them there. There were tiny, tender wavelets at some places and huge waves at others. By way of further adornment, stalactites hung from the ceiling like exquisite chandeliers.

This magnificent cave is nature's Dilwara Temple. I had seen sculptures in stone at the Dilwara Temple on Mount Abu (a hill station in Rajasthan), just as finely and delicately crafted as the rock formations in this cave on the bank of Narmada. One was created by man; the other by nature. At both places, it is impossible to guess from the outside that such divine splendour resides within. We gazed spellbound at the cave sculptures for long time.

Just as we turn back to the best chapters after reading a book that grips our interest, we inspected all the sculptures and then returned to our special favourites for further scrutiny. Some rocks were variously shaped: they looked either like shoulder blades, or plumes, or even banana leaves. At other places, they seemed to come to life, prancing and wafting around like a spring breeze. It was as if the rocks had grown wings.

The surging beauty of stone was on full display here—the beauty of stone in flight!

We were reluctant to leave the quiet solitude, the sheer beauty and the holy atmosphere of the cave and return to the world outside. But we had to go. We returned to the *ashram* where the *sadhu*-in-charge welcomed us and offered us the use of the cooking facilities.

Two *sanyasis*<sup>5</sup>, to whom he wanted to introduce us, had been living in that *ashram* for last few months. The younger *sanyasi* now came towards us. He was young, good-looking and soft-spoken.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Whose name?" he asked quizzically. Turning around, he countered: "The name of this body? I am not this body."

"Then who are you?"

<sup>5</sup>*sanyasi*: A male Hindu religious mendicant; an ascetic

"That is the question! That is what I am searching for."

There was no way he would reveal his name. He admitted somewhat reluctantly that he was from Jammu<sup>6</sup>. Then he said: "Come on! I'll take you to meet my *gurubhai*<sup>7</sup>."

His *gurubhai* was lying down inside a room, covered with a sheet. He sat up when he saw us. He was stark naked. He had huge, fervent eyes, a thick black beard, milk-white teeth and a charismatic face. As he sat up he covered his lower body with the sheet. We paid close attention to his words. He spoke in cultured Hindi, now and then quoting Sanskrit couplets. After a while, he broke into such excellent English that we were astonished.

I was particularly struck by something he said: "Just as the veneration of an individual is no good, the veneration of the majority is no good either. If 51 people decide on something, does that make it true or right? We had democracy here in our country in the past too. Then it was known as *gantantra*<sup>8</sup>. But look at the quality of the people who ruled in those days. Every person was educated, aware of his responsibilities and his duties. These days, the rule is a mobocracy. It is not a democracy."

We had clearly made the acquaintance of an ascetic operating from a higher plane of wisdom. He was completely detached from the material world. After listening to him for almost an hour, we still did not know which province he hailed from.

The *sadhu* who was in charge of the *ashram* told us that he was from Gujarat. His mother and sister had come from Vadodara to see him. He received them too in his state of nakedness.

The evening was drawing to a close, but as the next village was nearby, we pressed on. After a short while, we reached Hirapur—the place where the Hiran River meets the Narmada. There was a small, uninhabited guest-house right at the confluence of the rivers. The single room was locked, so we settled down for the night in the verandah. We had already eaten our meal so in no time we fell asleep.

The *dharmshala* was perched at the edge of a cliff. Below lay the broad and clear expanse of the Narmada, with the Hiran River on the left. It

<sup>6</sup>Jammu: A part of the north Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, located mainly in the Himalayan Mountains

<sup>7</sup>*gurubhai*: A spiritual brother who is a fellow disciple of the same *guru*

<sup>8</sup>*gantantra*: A republic; state rule by the people

was so cold that I awoke barely two hours after falling asleep. It was too cold to get back to sleep. I tossed and turned all night. I tried curling up and heaping the covers right over my head, but even then, I could not get a wink of sleep.

Finally, I hit upon an idea. We were in an isolated place and it was a very dark night, so we had left a clay oil lamp burning in a niche in the wall. I took the lamp down and placed it by my side, though not too close for fear of my bedclothes catching fire. I could feel a little heat. I lit a candle as well. And the funny thing was: I quickly fell asleep!

A farmer erects a scarecrow in his field to chase the crows away. I used a clay lamp and a candle-scarecrow to chase the cold away. Well, I did not put them up as 'scarecrows' but 'scare-colds', to scare the cold out of my own mind. Either way, I finally got to sleep.

The Emperor Akbar<sup>9</sup> had once remarked to a man who, on a cold winter's night, stood immersed up to his neck in a pond: "You kept warm by the heat of the lights you could see in the distance." Now, for the first time, I understood that there was more than a grain of truth in those words.



### 3. Hirapur to Jhansighat

The last night of the moon in the dark fortnight (called '*Krishna Paksha*'<sup>10</sup>) had arrived. The river had dozed off but the moon and the stars were wide awake. When I woke up at night, I could not resist gazing at the clear sky, so full of stars despite the cold. It struck me that the night sky is the greatest and most splendid museum, more so than any on earth. The Lord has adorned it with all manner of heavenly bodies: planets, stars and the moon, and though there is so much on offer, there is no entry fee at all! A wicked thought occurred to me. If a friend from Delhi or any other big city was with me, and I had urged him: "Look at the sky!" he might have glanced at it indifferently and replied: "It's okay, but you can't compare it with the sky in our planetarium."

If any spectacle can be seen without an entry fee, it would seem it is not be worth viewing!

We were ready to leave by dawn. We had to cross the Hiran River. The Hiran is so deep that there is no way to cross it except by boat, so we

<sup>9</sup>Akbar: A Mughal emperor known as Akbar the Great (1542-1605) whose power and benign influence extended beyond his kingdom to the entire Indian subcontinent. He was known for his unifying policies and excellent administration

<sup>10</sup>*Krishna Paksha*: The reference is to the fortnight of the waning moon, when the moon diminishes in size from the night after the full moon. *Paksha* literally means 'side' and is used to indicate the dark (*Krishna*) or bright (*Shukla*) period on either 'side' of the full moon



took the ferry across. We were headed towards Jhalaun, through Belkheri. We asked a passer-by how far away Jhalaun was. He said, "Two kilometres." When we asked someone else again after two kilometres, we got the same reply: "Two kilometres."

Someone had mentioned that the route higher above the river would be a shorter distance rather than the route along the river's edge, so we took the shorter way. The road stretched endlessly. We walked all morning—it was a tough and long haul. When we finally reached Jhalaun, in the blazing heat of high noon, we were completely exhausted. A friend of mine, a cheerful and prosperous farmer, lived in Jhalaun. Pilgrims received *sadavrat* from his house and got to stay there as well. When we reached there, his hearty welcome dissipated all our tiredness. He was 72 years old: a simple, straightforward and easy-going man. He told everyone who dropped into his house: "My childhood friends have come, my childhood brothers have come!" He treated us like members of his family.

His brother-in-law, another prosperous farmer whom I also knew, was with him. He took me to his house. His sons were now managing the farm. "When I was 40 years old," he recounted, "my wife passed away. That was about 25 years ago. Everyone encouraged me to marry again, but I didn't, because I knew that a second marriage wouldn't possibly work after the loss of my wife. Our minds had become so attuned to each other that if I was out in the fields and fancied a certain dish for lunch, that very dish would be served when I returned home for my meal! In the same way, if I was out in the fields and she wanted me to come back home, I would instinctively return! When we had such an intrinsic and divine connection, how could I think of another wife?" His voice was mellow with an extraordinary depth of affection.

After a pause, he said, "I stay at home all day, but in the evenings I go out into the fields. There's a small house out there where I sleep at night. My sons and daughters-in-law live in this house."

If I include cousins, I have five brothers-in-law who are like brothers. One of my brothers-in-law had five sisters while the rest of the cousins had none. So each cousin took on the responsibility for one sister. After arranging the sisters' marriages, they have continued to fulfil their duties in a very loving way. Everyone takes the greatest care of each other, beyond all expectations. There is such unity in the family.

"Though they are cousins, they love each other more than blood brothers."

After this visit, I returned to my friend's house. He insisted that we stay on to celebrate *Diwali*<sup>2</sup> with him and his family. He tempted us: "There will be a big feast for the whole village the next day, the day of the *Annakut*<sup>3</sup> festival. You shouldn't leave until then." But I had to reach Jabalpur the following evening, so we could only stay overnight. We moved on the next morning. The path wended its way along the riverside.

At one point we met six pilgrims, walking very fast in a single file. They politely answered my few questions before quickly moving on. At the speed at which they were walking, they would no doubt complete the whole pilgrimage in five months. They must have clocked at least 15 kilometres per day.

As we walked further, we came by a little stream. A shelter from the sun had been built in a field beside the stream. The students sat there to rest. I was bathing in the stream when a farmer came along. It was his field. "What's this stream called?" I asked him.

"It's only a small stream. It has no name," he said.

"What's your name?" I enquired.

"Halka," he replied. '*Halka*' means mild or light in weight.

"From now on," I announced, "the name of this stream is '*Halka Stream*'."

"Well, it's only a little stream, so the name fits," he laughed, adding, "But nobody except me will know it. The villagers don't know its name. So it doesn't really matter whether you give it a name or not."

Halka's logic was irrefutable!

Onward we went, sometimes through fields, sometimes on the Narmada's sandy shore. We could see a pilgrim walking ahead of us.

<sup>2</sup>*Diwali*: The Hindu festival of lights. It commemorates the return of Lord Ram, the king of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, from 14 years of exile. It also celebrates the victory of good over evil.

<sup>3</sup>*Annakut*: Celebrated the day after Diwali, it is a Hindu festival commemorating the lifting of the Govardhan Mountain by Lord Krishna with his little finger. He held it up for seven days to protect the cows and people of Vrindavan (now in the state of Uttar Pradesh) against the deluge of rain sent by Indra, god of the heavens and rains. *Annakut* is also celebrated as a festival of food.

Quickening our pace, we caught up with him as he began to climb a path going up the cliff. We went up it too.

There was a small temple at the top of the cliff with a hut beside it. The pilgrim was going to stay there. He was actually from the local village, but he would not go back to his house. He was committed to the prescribed period of pilgrimage of three years, three months and 13 days. So far, only a year and a quarter had gone by. He had spent the monsoon at the *ashram* by the Guru Cave. I told him that we too had been there the day before yesterday.

"There were two *sanyasis* there," he said enthusiastically. "The elder is 32 years old and the younger, 28 years old. Both are fellow-disciples. How do I describe them to you? I stayed with them for four months. I believe the elder one to be an incarnation of God. Once, his mother, sister and nephews came from Vadodara to see him. He accepted lunch from his mother in his naked state, as innocent as a child, and left the *ashram* in the same state. I saw it all with my own eyes."

While at the *ashram*, I had heard what had happened afterwards. "But some days later," I informed the pilgrim, "the *ashram sadhu* and the young disciple wanted to get the elder *sanyasi* to come back. So the younger *sanyasi* took some clothing and went off to look for him. He found him at Surajkund, near Hoshangabad, and managed to persuade him to return to the *ashram* with him. He is there now. We saw him just before we came here."

"What! He went back?" the pilgrim exclaimed, adding dejectedly, "If I had known he was going back, I wouldn't have come here." He paused, and then went on: "He's from Gujarat. He was a very senior official in Delhi, on a salary of over 10,000 rupees. When he took an exam to study in America, he came first. Renouncing all that, he became a *sanyasi*. His *guru* lives in Varanasi. He has completely given up travelling in vehicles; he goes only on foot. Soon, he will initiate the younger *sanyasi*. The truth is that the younger one isn't a *sanyasi* yet, he's a *brahmachari*<sup>4</sup>. Only when he receives his initiation, will he be a *sanyasi*. Now they are fellow-disciples; then they will be teacher and disciple."

This confirmed what the *sadhu* at the *ashram* had said.

<sup>4</sup>*brahmachari*: A religious novice; one who undertakes several years of study of the classical Hindu texts and scriptures prior to religious initiation. A *brahmachari* also vows to remain celibate for life

"If only I had known he was going back, I wouldn't have come here," the pilgrim lamented again.

On a *parikrama*, one cannot turn back. That pious pilgrim could only hope that perhaps one day the elder *sanyasi* himself would be kind enough to come to his village.

We moved on, going back down the cliff path. In the afternoon, we sighted a new road bridge over the Narmada called the Jhansighat Bridge. I had wanted to walk all the way to Jabalpur, but as it was essential to reach Jabalpur that very evening, we ended our walk at this point, and took a bus that reached us home in two hours.

On this journey, I had been able to see the entire hemisphere of the sky—the all-pervading, immense sky—from horizon to horizon. No hills, no forests and mostly level ground, enabling me to see, every night, the full expanse of the sky like an endless ocean. I had gazed at the entire peaceful, awesome and uninterrupted skyscape, and it was wonderful beyond words!

The last Mogul emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, had died in exile in Burma. He had become very emotional in his final hours, sadly murmuring: "How unfortunate I am, not to get even two yards of land in my own country for a grave."

After a few years, the inhabitants of big cities might well say: "We can't even get two yards of sky to look at. We have banished the sky from our cities."

The Narmada was always with us on this journey. We had walked 80 kilometres in eight days. We had walked in blazing sunshine with gnawing, empty stomachs. A hope sprang up in my heart as I realised I was not that decrepit yet; I could undertake the Narmada's tough pilgrimage. I wanted to continue doing the walk in just that way. Had I ignored the call of my heart and listened to my rational mind, I would have remained at home, and what a lot of happiness I would have missed! The broad and splendid waterfront of Barman Ghat; the dear little waterfalls at Little Dhuanthar; the prehistoric drawings of Putalikhoh; the extraordinary stone sculptures of Guru Cave; the profoundly wise *sanyasi* at the *ashram*; the Narmada swinging from side to side over her wide bed; the uninterrupted sweep of the night sky and last night's slip of a crescent moon—I would have lost all that.

I learnt an important lesson on this journey: if our mind and reason try to stand in the way of realising our dreams, as indeed they sometimes do, we must not hesitate to dodge out of their way. We should ignore their threats and follow our hearts. There is so much more to life than cold reason and logic.

. . . After nine years, this was my first homage to the Narmada.



#### 4. Chaubis Avtar to Dhavrikund

When I had told my friends about my previous walk of the Narmada circuit, a few of them said that had they had known about my plan, they would certainly have come along.

"Look, you sneaked off quietly!" they accused me. "You never mentioned the walk to us or we would have come with you. Definitely! We are great nature-lovers too." I felt quite sorry when I heard this. 'What a great mistake I have made,' I thought. 'I went without them. I won't make the same mistake the next time. If even one of them comes along with me, my problems will be solved. I will be able to quickly get a group together.'

Mr A had been the most enthusiastic, so I asked him first. "I have to go away," he replied, looking ready to weep. "Even the train reservation is done. If only you had told me a month ago, I would definitely have come." Mr B said, "A close relative is coming home during the holidays. I'm stuck!" Mr C said, "My daughter's marriage is two months away. I'm busy with the preparations." Some time ago, Mr D had told me, "My younger daughter is getting married soon, and then I'll be free from all worldly responsibilities. There is nobody else at home. When I get the



chance, I'll go to Haridwar<sup>1</sup>." The younger daughter's wedding was long over but he had not yet gone to Haridwar. 'This one will surely come,' I thought. When I asked him, he said, "Both my daughter and son-in-law go out to work. They leave their child with me. What can I do? I can't go off and leave him alone."

They did not have to come for the whole trip, I offered magnanimously. "A week if you like, five days if you like, half an hour, a quarter of an hour, if you like!" When there were no takers, in spite of these great concessions, I realised that I must be the one and only idle fellow in our city with no responsibilities. Then, taking only Chhotu for company, off I went. Chhotu, a young man from the Gond<sup>2</sup> tribe, had arrived from his village just two days ago. He hardly spoke. Sometimes, just a few stray words would escape his mouth.

We arrived at Omkareswar on October 11, 1997. We found a huge crowd there as it was the festival of *Dussehra*<sup>3</sup>. It was hard to walk through the streets. Crossing the channel on the south side of the island by going over the bridge, we reached the channel on the north side. Many travellers were waiting for the boat. Among them was a group of *sanyasis* in red robes. One of them commented: "This will be my second *parikrama*. I completed the first one in five months."

"This is a *tamasik*<sup>4</sup> *parikrama*," another *sanyasi* joked.

We had to wait a while for the boat. The group of *sanyasis* bathed in the Narmada and immediately thereafter set off on their *parikrama*.

There was an ancient and dilapidated temple at Chaubis Avtar on the north bank. The name of the village was Panthya, but the place had always been known as 'Chaubis Avtar' ('24 incarnations') among pilgrims. There was a small *dharmshala* nearby. We decided to stay there overnight and continue our journey in the morning.

<sup>1</sup>Haridwar: Located in the state of Uttarakhand in north India, it is one of the seven holiest places in the country for Hindus

<sup>2</sup>Gond: The second largest tribe in India, believed to be of Dravidian stock

<sup>3</sup>*Dussehra*: One of the most important Hindu festivals in India, celebrating the triumph of good over evil by commemorating Lord Ram's victory over the demon king Ravana. Ravana is said to have had 10 heads, and '*dussehra*' literally means 'removal of 10'

<sup>4</sup>*tamasik*: A reference to the lowest group of foods (the higher groups being the pure *saatvic* followed by the rich *rajasic*). *Tamasik* foods are dry, stale or foul, and believed to promote the baser instincts in humans

Our *rishis*—the revered sages of olden times—had a beautiful fancy about Omkareswar. They said that here, the Narmada takes the shape of the sacred syllable 'ॐ' (OM) where she diverges into the two curves of the symbol. I had come here several times and travelled all around the island by boat, but I was unable to discern the shape of the symbol. I had asked the *sadhu* in charge of the *dharmshala* where we had stayed in Panthya about it. He had said it was not the Narmada that took the shape of an ॐ, but the Omkareswar hill formation. He pointed out a little hillock opposite the *dharmshala* that, he said, was the dot on top of the ॐ symbol.

This was a new complication! Was it the Narmada that formed the ॐ shape or was it the Omkareswar Hill? Imagining that the little hill was the dot of the ॐ was even more intriguing. Either way, the poetic interpretations of this imaginary form were so charming that there was no need to verify their geographical truth. Poetic fancies need not follow geographical facts.

We continued our trek the next morning. The air was fresh and invigorating. Our path through the vivid green fields was very pleasant. After a couple of kilometres we could see three tiny little huts on a hillock. As we had heard in Panthya that three *sadhus* from Bengal were living there, we went up to meet them. The first *sadhu* we met, though the most senior in age, was still a *brahmachari* under novice vows, so he wore white robes. The other two were considerably younger than him but they wore the red robes of *sanyasis*. All three were followers of Ramakrishna Paramhans<sup>5</sup>, a famous 19th century *sanyasi* and spiritual leader.

Brahmachariji<sup>6</sup> said, "Come along, I'll introduce you to the *sanyasis*. But as they have taken a vow of silence, they won't be speaking."

A young *sanyasi* sat beside the sacred fire in another hut. There was an expression of glorious peace on his face. He welcomed us with a smile. As we left, after sitting for a little while, he gave us ash from the sacred fire as *prasad*<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>Ramakrishna Paramhans: Born as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay (1836-1886), Ramakrishna Paramhans as he was known by his disciples was a Hindu mystic and priest who also practised other religions including Islam and Christianity. As a universalist, he believed that all religions led to one God. His most famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda, founded the Ramakrishna Mission to spread his religious school of thought

<sup>6</sup>ji: Added to a person's name or title to show respect

<sup>7</sup>*prasad*: An offering, sometimes edible, to a deity which is then kept or consumed by devotees in the belief that it contains the deity's blessing

Then we sat in Brahmachariji's hut. A third *sanyasi* came in. Brahmachariji had completed the Narmada pilgrimage a long time ago.

"Did the Bhils<sup>8</sup> rob you in Shulpan Jhari?" I asked him.

"I wouldn't call it 'robbery'," he responded. "Actually the wilderness is a test for pilgrims: a test of abandoning worldly concerns, of renunciation and faith. When Draupadi<sup>9</sup> was being stripped of her clothes, she clutched her sari with one hand and raised the other hand in supplication to Lord Krishna. But Krishna did not come to her rescue. When she raised both hands and called on the Lord, Krishna came swiftly. As long as there is doubt or pride in our minds, the Lord will stay at a distance. The day we surrender our souls completely to the Lord, and wholeheartedly take refuge in him, the Lord will rush to come to us. At Shulpan Jhari, pilgrims lift both hands in supplication when they call upon the Lord. It is like being initiated into renunciation. That is why I don't like to call it 'robbery'."

This was a completely new way of looking at the Bhils' banditry.

"Well, now let me make you some tea," Brahmachariji offered.

"Please don't take the trouble. I don't drink tea," I said.

"Then please have some sweets. I am a Bengali—how could I celebrate *Dussehra* without sweets? There is no shortage of milk here. These were made only yesterday."

I began conversing in Bengali with him. It had been 44 years since I had left Shantiniketan<sup>10</sup>, but I could still speak Bengali.

We decided to walk along the riverside after Bakhatgarh, scrambling over the rocks. We walked along the bank while looking across at the other side of the river. We had been forced to leave the opposite bank between Dhavrikund and Satmatra because of the impassable rocks. I

<sup>8</sup>Bhils: A tribal community found mainly in central India, in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Historically a hunting community, the Bhils are now mainly settled farmers or landless labourers

<sup>9</sup>Draupadi: The common wife of the five Pandava brothers, the warrior princes mentioned in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. Originating in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, the final form of the *Mahabharata*, the longest Sanskrit epic, is said to have been completed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>10</sup>Shantiniketan: Located in the Birbhum District in West Bengal, Shantiniketan (literally 'abode of peace') is a university town and cultural centre that developed from the vision of the Nobel Laureate poet and litterateur Rabindranath Tagore. It became one of India's leading hubs for education and the arts

could, at least, look across at the stretch where my feet had not been able to tread.

The way onward was very difficult and the blazing sun seemed to spew fire. Drenched in sweat, we arrived at Rampura in the afternoon. No, actually we had not quite arrived. Rampura lay before us but the Kanarh River was in between. We could not cross it at that point. There was nobody around for us to ask how we could get across to the other side. Finally, we walked far upstream and managed to cross over. The detour had cost us two hours.

There was a temple with a *dharmshala* at the confluence of the Kanarh and the Narmada. We stayed there for the night. The wife of the temple priest informed us, "This temple belongs to the government. My husband gets a salary for performing the rituals and ceremonies."

"Has he done the Narmada *parikrama*?" I asked.

"He left for the *parikrama* when our daughter was two months old."

I was astonished. "Why?"

"We had been married for 10 years and I hadn't conceived. Then he took a vow: 'O Mother! If we have a child, I will do your *parikrama*.' By the grace of Mother Narmada we had a daughter, so off he went. He took the usual three years, three months and 13 days over it. That was 14 years ago. He came to this place for his *parikrama*, and then we settled here. At first, I didn't much like being here, but now I am so fond of this place that I never want to go back to our village which is near Ujjain. My in-laws and the farm are there. Our other children go to school there. Only my little boy is with me."

"How many children do you have?" I asked her.

"Five," she said shyly.

The Narmada had indeed been very kind to them!

We set out again in the morning. Our way took us through teak trees. It would have been possible to go straight to Dhavrikund from this point, but Sitavan, also known as Sitakund or Sita Temple, was 12 kilometres away from the Narmada. Pilgrims usually made it a point to visit the temple so we went there too. It was in a very isolated spot at the edge of the forest. With the forest on one side and fields on the other, it was as if a physical boundary line had been drawn. It was fascinating to see

the edge of the forest marked in such a straight line.

The priest at the temple provided good lodging facilities. He refused to let us cook our own food. He invited us to have a meal with him after the evening service. Although we had never met before, he extended such warm hospitality that I felt like paying him a compliment in return. The *chappatis*<sup>11</sup> were thick and soft. I thought the usual fare would have been wheat *roti*<sup>12</sup> but these seemed to be a variety of special millet *roti*.

"Is this millet *roti*? It's extremely good!" I said.

"No, it's wheat *roti*," said the priest.

I was overcome with embarrassment. My intended compliment had boomeranged. Now and then my foolishness does pop up. I may be getting old but I am not yet ready to be regarded as senile. I feel quite unprepared for old age—let me hang onto my youth, O Lord!

We went ahead the next morning. It was so very pleasant to walk in the morning hours. The lush green fields gave way to teak trees. A breeze stirred the teak leaves that waved like fans, wafting cool air over us.

At one spot a young tree stopped me. "I am stationary," it said. "I can't walk, but I am very happy to see you walking. Accept my congratulations. But convey my disapproval to those who can walk but take a car or a scooter to go just a short distance!"

I remained silent. "Well, speak! Will you convey my message or not?" the tree demanded.

In a low voice I replied: "My sons do that. They would drive a car to bed if they could. If I can't say anything to them, how can I reproach other people? However, whether or not they need your condemnation, I would certainly appreciate your good wishes."

The tree grinned fleetingly. "You already have my congratulations. Do you want it in writing?"

"Hundreds of years ago, when there wasn't any paper," I rejoined, "our scriptures were written on the leaves of trees: on palmyra leaves or the leaves of the mountain birch. If you will write down your good wishes on your teak leaves and give them to me, I will preserve them safely."

<sup>11</sup>*chappati*: Unleavened bread, also called 'roti', which is circular in shape. It is a staple of Indian meals and eaten with side dishes

<sup>12</sup>*roti*: Indian unleavened bread

"What, you want certificates? My opinion of certificate-collectors ..."

"I stand condemned!" I interrupted hastily.

"I wouldn't go that far, but I certainly don't like certificate-collectors. Now off you go, your companion has already gone ahead."

I like talking to trees. 'When I go home,' I thought, 'I'll write them a letter. I'm sure I'll get a reply too, written on their leaves.'

Chhotu and I sat down to rest at a spot beside a stream. A boy was grazing his cattle nearby. "Please sit a bit further away, *Baba*<sup>13</sup>," he requested. "My animals are getting startled." He used the Gujarati word for 'startled'. On the south bank of the Narmada I had noticed that from Omkareswar onwards, going towards Gujarat, the Nimarhi dialect of Hindi was well-flavoured with Gujarati words.

When a river meets the sea, it does not dissipate all of a sudden. Its current flows far into the sea. Likewise, a language does not cease abruptly at the border of a region. Its current too crosses the border and flows quite far beyond.

There were fields and hills covered with forests ahead of us. We reached Dhavrikund in the afternoon. Immediately upon our arrival, we saw, an abundance of the Narmada's waterfalls right before us. We stood transfixed in the scorching heat with our knapsacks still on our aching shoulders, staring at them. What a masterpiece had been created by the hands of the Narmada here!

<sup>13</sup>*Baba*: An honorific, sometimes added to the name of a person to show respect



## 5. Dhavrikund

The pool at the base of the waterfalls was alive and swirling and the accompanying roar reverberated through the entire area. The river seemed to be announcing her triumphant arrival here with fanfare.

The Narmada expressed her exuberant nature in such lively, tumbling waterfalls. Her mood at the falls was as playful as that of a girl of sweet 16!

The very first sight that greeted us upon our arrival at Dhavrikund, after hours of walking in the scorching heat, was of the Narmada's gorgeous waterfalls. We stood immobilised on top of the cliff, gazing at the scene. Then I thought, 'We should leave our belongings at a *dharmshala*, bathe, wash our clothes and freshen up. We can then return to gaze at these waterfalls to our hearts' content. Till then, we can listen to their roars and rumbles. *Karne adhwaik darshnam!* (Hearing is half seeing!)

The *dharmshala* was nearby—it was not much more than an open verandah. We went there to bathe, leaving our belongings in the care of a *sadhu*, whom we assumed was the caretaker. We had been transfixed by the wild dance of the waterfalls, and it had been hard to tear ourselves

away. Our first look was just an overview; we would observe the falls more thoroughly that evening. We decided to stay on an extra day. It was just not possible to do full justice to this extraordinary work of art by the Narmada in a single day.

The evening drew near, and the sun had lost much of its fury. It was the perfect time to view the waterfalls. We settled ourselves at a spot opposite yet quite close to the falls. At first glance, it appeared that the Narmada had a two-storeyed house at this spot. She slid down the banisters from the upper storey to the lower. Taking into account all the waterfalls of the entire river, we can say that the Narmada has seven storeys.

There were all kinds of waterfalls: large and small; broad and narrow; those that fell over sheer vertical drops or those that slanted downwards at an angle like a playground slide. Some of the falls were aggressive, others infiltrated the rocks sneakily. There were even one or two waterfalls that sashayed down like models on a catwalk. The centre of the main fall cascaded down in a pale green column. Those falls were indeed green-throated.

Dhavrikund is the department store of waterfalls! You can choose the waterfall you like best, watch its charging current, listen to its roar, get drenched in its spray and make it your own.

Down in the pool, an even more intense war was being waged. The pool looked like an enormous boiling cauldron. It was impossible to make out whether its activity was a process of creation or destruction. The meeting waters leapt, reared, pounced, dashed, struck, pushed, shoved, jostled and then rushed onwards, rippling and foaming, shattering and scattering like thousands of broken pearl necklaces.

The Narmada took great pleasure in wrestling with the rocks. The fight between river and rock always ended in a victory for the river.

*Shivalings*<sup>1</sup> that form in this pool are worshipped all over India. People would come from far and wide to collect these stone symbols of the Hindu god Shiva. Now however the sheer volume of charging water made it impossible to retrieve the sacred symbols.

I turned my attention to the birds wheeling above the falls. They seemed to be pleading with me, "Take a little notice of our presence too."

<sup>1</sup>*Shivaling*: The male symbol representing the Hindu god Shiva, who is the destroyer of evil

I could not resist having a bath, seating myself under a cute little waterfall. I thereby became a proud graduate of this Dhavrikund University of the Narmada.

The following night would be *Sharad Purnima*<sup>2</sup>. We had arrived in good time to witness the full moon, but as night approached, the sky was shrouded in clouds, blocking the sight of the moon. It also rained in the middle of the night. I had never been so furious with the clouds before. If I could, I would have burnt an effigy of the clouds, so great was my disappointment at not seeing the full moon.

Fortunately by morning, the clouds had vanished and the sky was clear.

There was a small room at the *dharmshala* occupied by a *baba*. He kept it padlocked whenever he went out. We had mistaken him to be the caretaker of the place. Our luggage lay strewn about, out in the open.

"Baba," I asked him, "may we keep our things in your room?"

"I'm going to take the cows out to graze. I'll come back in the evening," he replied.

"Oh, do you take care of the cows too?"

"Perhaps you have mistaken me for the caretaker," he said. "I am neither the caretaker here nor a cowherd. I'm a pilgrim. I am staying here for *Chaturmas*<sup>3</sup>, or of the monsoon retreat. I will continue my pilgrimage after *Dev Uthani Ekadashi*<sup>4</sup>, the official conclusion of the monsoon retreat."

"Why do you take the cows out to graze then?" I asked.

"She's my cow," he said. "She is undertaking the *parikrama* as well. So the cow is a pilgrim too. I travel with her. She is the mistress, I am her servant. I have made a commitment on her behalf."

"Where did you start your *parikrama*?"

<sup>2</sup>*Sharad Purnima*: A harvest festival celebrated on the night of the full moon in the Hindu month of *Ashwin*, which falls between September and October. It marks the end of the rainy season

<sup>3</sup>*Chaturmas*: The four holy months from July to September, observed by pious Hindus. It is believed to have been a period of deep meditation by Lord Vishnu. July to September is also the monsoon season in India

<sup>4</sup>*Dev Uthani Ekadashi*: Marking the end of the four-month period of meditation by Lord Vishnu, which coincides with the end of the monsoon, the day also heralds the beginning of the auspicious marriage season for Hindus

"From Amarkantak, I had brought a calf with me. She grew up to be an adult cow. At Reva-Sagar, where the Narmada merges with the sea, my cow gave birth to a calf. Pilgrims named the calf 'Reva'. My cow's name is 'Narmada', and her calf's is 'Reva'."

His cow and calf were both tied to a tree outside.

"Did you go through Shulpan Jhari?" I asked him. "The Bhils must have robbed you."

"Yes, they robbed both me and the cow. They took away all her decorations. They even took her bell."

"What if they had taken the cow?"

"I'd give them my life but not my cow," he replied.

He might very well have done just that.

The famous British author R L Stevenson had undertaken a short journey through France with a mule. He had written an account of it in his book, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. Had this pilgrim written a book titled *The Narmada Parikrama with a Cow*, how fascinating it would be! Some chapters of the book might include 'My Cow's Thoughts' and 'When the Bhils Robbed the Cow', and so on.

Just then the cow mooed. "I must go now," said the *baba*. "My cow is calling me. It's time to take her out to graze."

Once again, I was drawn back to the waterfalls. Observing them from a distance, I understood how they were formed. The Narmada's main stream flows from the far bank, over rocks, to the near bank from where it cascades down as myriad waterfalls. All the falls drop into the pool below. From this pool, the Narmada veers dramatically back towards the far bank. Then swiftly, she contracts and flows into a deep and rocky gorge. The rocks rear up on either side like the walls of a formidable fortress and the Narmada, now as narrow as a canal, flows meekly in between.

The Narmada is a member of a large family of rivers that sweeps through the Indian sub-continent. While she ranks fifth in order of length, her distinction lies not in her size or the quantum of water she carries, but in her rocky character and the sheer exuberance of her innumerable waterfalls. She exults in her waterfalls, in the gorges, the narrow valleys, the forests and the mountain ramparts and in the various tribes that live on her banks.

Because of the mountainous and rocky terrain, we had crossed over from the bank of Narmada which now lay on the opposite side. 'Well,' I consoled myself, 'I can walk along this side and still be able to see the parts of the opposite bank that I missed, and so feel less regret.'

Walking further, I met a young *sanyasi* near a hut. "What is your name?" I asked.

"The Very Reverend One Thousand and Eight Venerable Huzurudit Kashi Varanasi Laharatara Kashish Nirmal Parakh Sat Saheb Kabir," he intoned.

"Such a long name?" I queried.

"Huzurudit is the name of my *guru*," he explained. "My name is Nirmal Parakh. I sleep out in the open beside the fire. I live under the sky."

"I'm going for a walk downstream, along the riverside," I informed him.

"I'll come along with you, if that's okay," he said.

He took his wooden staff and we walked along the gorge, heading downstream from the base of the falls. Pointing out a rugged outcrop, the *sanyasi* said: "This is called 'Bhuetonga'."

"What does that mean?"

"Bhuetonga means 'Bhima's<sup>5</sup> Knee'."

It was not possible to go much further due to the steep cliffs and dense forest, so we decided to go back. I turned to look once more at the compelling waterfalls. There was a rainbow in the froth rising from the falls; it was not a complete arch but more like the curved blade of a giant sabre.

Just then a cheeky breeze came along, drenching me with its cargo of spray. I shrieked with delight at the sudden wet onslaught.

Looking around, I could see fishermen standing with their fishing lines right beside the crown of the waterfalls. The birds wheeling above were fishing too, suddenly dipping into the water and swooping up with their prize catch. Further down, the local villagers were crossing a narrow section of the Narmada by boat. They were going to attend a festival. I was entranced, witnessing all this activity until late in the evening.

<sup>5</sup>*Bhima*: The second of the five Pandava brothers, the warrior princes who feature in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*

That night was *Sharad Purnima*, the celebration of the moon's greatest glory. Fortunately, the sky was clear. The waterfalls had looked lovely sparkling in the sunshine. They would be incredibly beautiful in the flood of milky white moonlight.

I did not have the courage to go alone down to the waterfalls in the middle of the night. It was eerily still. The roar of the falls sounded even louder in that stillness. The cascades, so utterly charming by day, pounced like panthers by night. For some reason this place, so irresistibly beautiful in the daytime, became a fearsome monster at night. It was not safe to get close to the falls either, as the path had become very slippery. So I remained at the top of the cliff, watching the spectacle from a safe distance.

The all-pervading moonlight revealed the whole scene to me from my vantage point—the unceasing swirl of the river, the expanse of the opposite bank, the cascades crashing into the milkwhite pool, and the pool itself which looked stunning. It glittered in the moonlight like an orb of concentrated light, as if it were itself a large moon.

At Dhavrikund that night, the full moon was like a bride alighting from her palanquin, to depart only at dawn.

A king, they say, has to sleep in a different place every night. Though we were no kings we followed the same custom during a *parikrama*. Yet, in a place where we were ensnared by its beauty, we stretched our stay to two nights. Though we had stayed at Dhavrikund for two nights, I still did not feel like moving on. Would I ever be able to come back to these elegant waterfalls set in the middle of a forest? Perhaps not!

Then I thought, I should not feel sad at the sense of loss. Whenever the longing to see these falls arose, I could go to the Dhuandhar Falls at Bheraghat. The Narmada is a river with abundant waterfalls, but the best two are at Dhuandhar near Jabalpur, and these falls at Dhavrikund near Omkareswar. By looking at one, it would be easy to imagine the other. Looking at both, anyone could tell that they were two sons of the same mother.

There is quite a difference between the two though. Dhuandhar is a single massive waterfall. At Dhavrikund, the falls are decentralised. The Narmada flows away from Dhuandhar through a narrow gorge of marble rocks. Similarly, at Dhavrikund, she also flows through a narrow gorge



but the rock strata there are black or slate-coloured. The ramparts of the Narmada at Dhavrikund are similar to those at Bheraghat. It is said that history repeats itself: here, it is geography that is self-replicating.

So whenever waterfalls of Dhavrikund come to my mind and I have a longing to see them, I would go to Dhuandhar. That would lessen the pain of separation from these exquisite falls. Still, as I left Dhavrikund I announced to its waterfalls: "I will come back and see you one more time . . . one more time."

Still, as I left Dhavrikund I announced to its waterfalls: "I will come back and see you—one more time . . . one more time . . ."



## 6. Dhavrikund to Barkesar

It was mid-morning, and the day was already ablaze with heat. The entire village looked washed and clean by the previous night's rain. The lush fields looked even more thoroughly washed. Our path led us along the top of a cliff high above the Narmada. The strip of land at the water's edge below was decorated with a frill of foam by the Narmada's little waves.

When we stopped to rest at the temple in Govari, the priest recounted what had happened there about 50 years ago. Two brothers, possibly twins, had come there and observed austerities for 12 years—one remaining under a tree, the other confining himself in a cave below. They did not meet each other even once in those 12 years. Afterwards they both left to go to another place for further austerities.

Some of the villagers were also sitting with us. One boy had a severe pain in his belly. A villager told him to lie down, and began to massage him. "His navel has slipped out of place," the healer informed me. He massaged the boy's abdomen for a short while, and moved the boy's legs up and down, after which he said, "Now sit up."

The boy sat up, very pleased that his pain had gone. Then he turned to me, saying: "Tonight is a full moon night, *baba*. We should eat fruit today. I'll bring you some."

"But the full moon was last night," I said.

"No," the boy insisted, "it's tonight."

I had seen two *Dussehras* and two *Diwalis* in a single year several times before. Now I was to experience two successive full moon nights!

The boy brought a musk melon from his house, sliced it and served it to us. "You should go along the lower path beside the Narmada from here to Premgarh," he suggested.

We followed his advice and arrived at Premgarh in the heat of the afternoon. The village comprised a mere dozen huts tucked up away between the steep slopes of the hills. Here, the Khadi river meets the Narmada. Leaving our belongings under a tree, we bathed in the Khadi. After Chhotu finished bathing, he went back to the village, but I stayed behind. I was about to return too after washing myself and my clothes, when I saw a red-robed young *sanyasi* standing in front of me. Fair-skinned, head shaved, bare-bodied till the waist, with a rosary of *rudraksh*<sup>1</sup> beads around his neck, a *kamandal*<sup>2</sup> in hand and a red bag slung from his shoulder, he was bathed in perspiration.

"Are you on *parikrama*?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Where have you come from, today?"

"From Sitavan. I left very early in the morning. I came to Dhavrikund at 10 o'clock."

I was astonished. He had walked 40 kilometres in half a day and wanted to keep going.

"Lakkarkot's jungle starts from here," I told him. "It is a dense forest. 22 kilometres long. If you set out now, you'll still be in there at night and you will have a lot of trouble getting through. Why don't you stay with us? We'll all go through the forest together tomorrow."

He agreed. "What is your name?" I asked.

<sup>1</sup>*rudraksh*: An evergreen tree, the seeds of which are strung together to make a necklace used in prayer. The significance of the seed arises from the literal meaning of '*rudraksh*' which means 'the eye of Shiva'

<sup>2</sup>*kamandal*: A watering can

"Swami<sup>3</sup> Hansanand," he replied. "My *guru*'s *ashram* is in Ludhiana but this body is from Nepal." He had come from Nepal at the age of 14 to study Sanskrit in Benaras (now Varanasi) and had settled there. He had taken the holy vows of being a *sanyasi* while he was a student. Now he was 24.

"Before beginning my pilgrimage," the *sanyasi* said, "I stayed a couple of weeks at the Virakt Kutī Ashram in Kherighat. A French *sanyasi* and a Greek lady, who were also his *guru*'s disciple, hence like brother and sister, were there too. They were both going on the pilgrimage barefoot. They had stayed there for the *Chaturmas* retreat and left after *Diwali*. They both belonged to the Udasin Order<sup>4</sup> and spoke very good Hindi. The *sanyasi* had done one *parikrama* before; now he is doing a second one with his *gurubehen*<sup>5</sup>. Both are now Indian citizens."

We camped under a tree. There was an open *dharmshala* nearby, but it had been used as a cowshed; the floor was sloping and so uneven that we had no wish to stay there. A big fat man with a bushy beard lived alone in a fine house near the *dharmshala*. He sat all day on a wooden bed. I never saw him leave his seat. While so seated, he would give orders to his workers. His verandah was bare. I told him that the floor of the *dharmshala* was very rough and asked if there was any other place we could stay. I was hoping he would offer his verandah.

"What do you want, a palace?" he scolded me. "Or a comfortable bed? Why then did you leave home?" I was effectively silenced.

Today is Purnima—*Sharad Purnima*. It is customary to eat *kheer*—a sweet rice pudding made with thickened milk—as part of the celebratory feast. In spite of all our efforts, we could not get milk for the *kheer* from anywhere, so Chhotu made *khichdi*—rice cooked with lentils—instead. Then the full moon began to rise.

"Put the *khichdi* out in the open for a while, Chhotu. The moon will pour its nectar onto it too, just as it does on *kheer*!" I suggested.

Somehow we managed to sleep in that uncomfortable *dharmshala*.

By midnight, the full moon had reached its zenith. There was not a

<sup>3</sup>Swami: A title of respect given to a Hindu religious teacher; an ascetic who is a master

<sup>4</sup>Udasin Order: Derived from the Sikh religion, it is a religious and ascetic sect founded by Sri Chand (1494-1643), the son of Guru Nanak, the founder and first *guru* of the Sikh religion. Sri Chand is said to have lived for 149 years, astonishingly retaining his youthful features

<sup>5</sup>*gurubehen*: A spiritual sister who is a fellow disciple of the same *guru*

single star to be seen. The moon reigned in splendid isolation, an absolute monarch of the night sky.

At the *Kumbh Mela*<sup>6</sup> festival, on a day marked for a special holy dip, the *Naga*<sup>7</sup> *sadhus* and the *sanyasis* have the privilege of bathing first. Theirs is called the 'royal bath'. The 'common' people may bathe afterwards.

It looked to me as if the moon too was taking its royal bath in the sky that night, in solitary splendour. On that full moon night or royal bath night, no other planet or star was allowed to bathe. If some stars were secretly taking their bath near the horizon, far from the moon, well, that was quite another matter.

In the morning the *sanyasi* complained: "I slid right out of bed twice during the night. I couldn't sleep properly." We too had suffered the same plight.

We got ready and moved on. The flow of the Khadi River was rapid, and the stepping stones were very slippery. Crossing over, we came to Bhatkhera. Premgarh was on one side of the river, Bhatkhera on the other. The 22-kilometre long Lakkarkot jungle started at this point—a forest dense enough to challenge the courage of even the most fearless pilgrims. There was not even a small hut in the forest, leave alone a village. There was a pathway of course, but it was overgrown in many places by a profusion of weeds that had sprung up during the monsoon. Pamakheri was on the far side of the forest. Pilgrims crossing the Lakkarkot jungle aimed to reach there by dusk at all costs. At least the pathway was shaded, offering cool relief at every step along the way.

I had already traversed the omkareshwar forest on the opposite bank. That side was heavily forested too, but the dense thicket completely overgrown with foliage was quite daunting. Lakkarkot jungle is said to be the last descendant of the Dandakaranya Forest.

We crept into this thick forest like thieves breaking into a forbidden place. The profound silence seemed to stretch up to the sky. The occa-

<sup>6</sup>*Kumbh Mela*: The literal meaning is 'pitcher festival'. It refers to the pitcher carried by the Hindu gods from which drops of divine nectar fell into sea after it was churned. Held every three years at the sites of four sacred rivers in turn, the *Kumbh Mela* attracts the largest number of pilgrims in the world, who believe a dip in the holy river will cleanse them of all sins

<sup>7</sup>*Naga*: A descriptor of the naked *sadhus* belonging to the *Digamber* or 'sky-clad' sect. Shunning clothes, they smear holy ash on their bodies instead as part of an elaborate ritual before taking their holy dip

sional chirp of a bird accentuated the utter stillness. The fragrance of wild basil scented the air. I felt that we too were a part of this forest. The trees were mostly teak but there were also *dhava*<sup>8</sup>, *saja*<sup>9</sup>, *tendu*<sup>10</sup>, *koha*<sup>11</sup> and *anjan*<sup>12</sup>. It was Chhotu who introduced me to those trees. We had been told that we would have to cross the same ravine 15 times. We started counting while crossing back and forth but soon gave up. Sometimes we went astray and Chhotu would scout ahead to find a way through. The least hint of a path was good enough for him.

The forest was full of colourful, shady trees. Dry fallen leaves lay like a thick-piled carpet in several places. Their colours had faded but they gave off a delicate fragrance. Sunlight filtered through the leaves above. Dewdrops dripped from some of the trees.

The forest was showing all its treasure to us. We pressed on. When we reached deep into the woods, we found a statue of Lord Hanuman<sup>13</sup> inside a dilapidated hut. We did not see a single other person in the whole forest, nor even another hut, but we did spot a deer as well as a big snake.

We reached the end of the forest just before dusk.

That one day in the primeval forest will remain lodged in my memory for many years.

'Now that I have crossed the Lakkarkot Jungle,' I thought, 'I am entitled to be called a *'jungli'*—a wild man. 'Wild' in the sense of a tree or like-or a stream. Or maybe I am not qualified for such a respectable title!'

Emerging from the forest, we came upon a road and stopped to rest. After a little while, a villager came along. "I'm from Pamakheri," he said. "I've come here to graze the cows and buffalos. Those cottages you see

<sup>8</sup>*dhava*: A tropical perennial tree native to India that yields timber and gum

<sup>9</sup>*saja*: Prevalent in central India, the bark of the *saja* is used to heal wounds and boiled to make a decoction to cure diarrhoea. Its fruit is used in the treatment of fever, stomach aches and cholera. Its wood is considered sacred and used to make images of idols

<sup>10</sup>*tendu*: Found extensively in central India, the *tendu* tree has leaves that are used to make *bidis*, the poor man's cigarette

<sup>11</sup>*koha*: A tree valued for the medicinal properties of its bark, particularly for the treatment of diabetes

<sup>12</sup>*anjan*: Native to India, the *anjan* is a deciduous tree that belongs to the family of *gul-mohur*

<sup>13</sup>*Hanuman*: The Indian deity represented as a monkey, who was an ardent devotee of Lord Ram and a key character in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*

over there are mine. If you would like to stay at our house, we'll be very pleased." So indeed would we. We went straight there.

Pamakheri was two kilometres away. Most pilgrims stayed there and then headed straight to Barkesar, but by taking that route they missed the Indira Sagar Dam which was being built across the Narmada. We were keen to see it. Barkesar is about 15 kilometres away if one takes the direct route. Taking the detour to see the dam would be about 40 kilometres. Nevertheless, we still preferred the latter.

The *sanyasi* however declined to accompany us, saying: "I am going straight to Barakeswar from here. I have to get to the *Kumbh Mela* at Haridwar by the *Shivratri*<sup>4</sup> festival, so I must complete this pilgrimage before then."

The young *sanyasi* could do it. Walking 30 kilometres a day was no big deal for him. He did not cook his meal himself. He ate whatever was available, however coarse the meal might be, and moved on immediately. He was a true *sanyasi*, resolute in his renunciation. We wanted him to stay a few days with us, but he had made up his mind, so we did not insist. "It feels as though you were sent to help us cross Lakkarkot jungle," I said to him.

"I too was afraid to go into that forest," he confessed. "It was so desolate. Once a *sadhu* got lost in it and found his way out only after three days. It was good for me too to be with you."

The next morning, he left us at dawn and was lost in the mist in no time.

We too were ready to go. Then I discovered that one of my shoes had disappeared. We searched thoroughly but could not find it anywhere. It was a waterproof rubber shoe, but coloured like leather.

I was very upset. What would happen if I could not find it? I would have no alternative but to abandon the walk halfway and go back home. O Lord! This calamity had caught us totally unaware. The whole trip was in danger of being ruined by a little carelessness.

"The man in the last house has a few dogs," said somebody just then. "Maybe one of his dogs picked up your shoe and took it there. Go and see."

<sup>4</sup>Shivratri: The night following the 14 days of the waning moon in the dark fortnight of *Phalguna*, the Hindu calendar month which falls between February and March, when a festival is held in honour of the god Shiva

And sure enough, that was where my shoe was found! I cannot tell you how happy I was.

Sonabai, our hostess, plied us with buttermilk until we were full, and only then did she allow us to go.

There was a road that led straight to the dam, 18 kilometres away. How easy it was after battling the impenetrable forest to be walking on a road! It was a road but it had good qualities of a well-paved footpath. It was deserted, and flanked with leafy green trees.

We walked along, soaked in perspiration, finally reaching the dam by noon. The Narmada looked very pleasing here, flowing between the rocks. There was a road bridge nearby leading to a place called Narmada Nagar on the far side, where Girdhari, a friend of my son, lived. He was an engineer. We sent a message and he came over at once. He arranged good lodging facilities for us. "Why don't you bathe, and by then I will be back with lunch for you," he said.

We went down to the water to bathe. Opposite, a stream ran swiftly into a rocky tunnel and disappeared. The engineers had diverted the Narmada's course in order to build the dam. They had bored a tunnel about a kilometre long through the solid rock on the south side. The Narmada flowed through this diversion, reuniting with her natural water-course after emerging from the tunnel.

It was amazing to see how such a huge river could wend its way through such a small tunnel. Though the Narmada usually looks broad, her natural flow is very narrow. The Narmada has two accounts in her river 'banks': a current account and a savings account. (Actually, the current account does not appear to be very active.) Where the Narmada is broad, she has a hefty savings account of water. It is amusing that in English the riverside is called a 'bank' and the flow of water 'current'. Could banking terminology have been derived from the rivers?

The dam construction work was going on at a very rapid rate, day and night. Excavators, earth-movers and bulldozers swarmed all over the place. After the construction of this dam was completed, the Narmada will be transformed into a vast reservoir. This beautiful river will then become a matter of history, perhaps of archeology. Due to Bargi and Sardar Sarovar dam, Narmada has already been turned into two reservoirs. In a few years Narmada would be a link between those reservoirs.

If some young people were to come to me and say: "We would like to do a short walk along the banks of the Narmada, to see the various aspects of her beauty, and at the same time test our courage too," I would recommend that they go from Omkareswar to the Indira Sagar Dam. Walking from Omkareswar (Chaubis Avtar), they should reach Rampura by way of the wooded hills and spend the night there. Then they should leave the next morning directly for Dhavrikund. They can admire the waterfalls and the rugged rocky gorge through which the river flows. The next morning, they should follow the trail and spend the night either at Premgarh or Bhatkheri. On the fourth day, they should leave in the morning and go right through the Lakkarkot jungle, staying overnight at Pamakheri. On the fifth day, they should take the road to Indira Sagar, view the dam and the rocky channel through which the Narmada flows below the dam, and there, the new style of *panchkoshi* or the 'Five Day Walk' will be complete. They would get to see the incomparable splendour of the Dhavrikund waterfalls and enjoy the infinite pleasure of crossing the primeval forest of Lakkarkot. It would, for the most part, be both a beautiful nature walk and a challenging route march. All this in five days, covering a distance of 75 kilometres.

But who is going to ask me such a question these days? Anyway, if the question should arise, I have already given the answer!

We set off early the next morning and walked along until we reached the Chhayan River. It was quite deep and we had to wait for a ferry to get across. After quite some time a dinghy came along. It was so small that we could not cross over together. The boatman had to take us over one by one. Then on we went again, in the company of the Narmada.

At one spot, a number of fishermen and their families had pitched their tents on the riverbank. "It is not possible to walk on along the river-side from here," they told us. "Nobody goes that way. Go up from here. A path will take you to Bankapalas. You will find a track from there which will take you to Barkesar by dusk."

So that was what we did. We walked, sometimes through delightful wooded areas, sometimes through fields. Clouds gathered at midday. We found relief in their shadows from time to time. After Changarh and Parhadayi, we reached Anjaniya in the afternoon. The sky was completely blanketed by clouds. It looked as though it was about to rain. A villager

had invited us to stay at his house; we stopped there. However, a little later, the clouds drifted apart and since it looked like it would not rain after all, we continued our journey.

Now we were approaching Barkesar. It was the weekly market day and many people had gone to the market along this very route. We would meet them on their way home.

After we had walked for an hour or so, the sky clouded over again. Farmers began coming in groups from the opposite direction, urging their bullocks to pull the carts along speedily. Only two or three people could sit in the small bullock carts. The husband held the reins while his wife sat behind in her colourful sari, with a child on her lap. They raced along at breakneck speed, all in a hurry to get home. We too quickened our pace.

A mass of clouds had laid siege to the sun. Strong gusts of wind buffeted the trees. First it began to drizzle with tiny droplets, and then came the incessant downpour. We took shelter under a tree. The sky was torn apart by flashes of lightning. A tremendous gust of wind wrenched a big branch off a nearby tree and flung it to the ground with a crash.



## 7. Barkesar to Nilkanth

Fortunately, the storm abated after a little while and the rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun. We were on the move again.

We had been drenched by the rain, but now the atmosphere was really pleasant. The dust on the road had settled down. The air was clean and intoxicating. The leaves on the trees glistened after being washed by the rain. The sun played hide-and-seek among drifting fragments of cloud.

Barkesar was not far off. Our wet clothes had dried before we reached. The market had closed early because of the rain.

There was a hut on the cliff above the Narmada where pilgrims usually stayed. The man in-charge gave us permission to stay there too, and offered us items of food as well. The hut and the large yard in front of it were unusually clean. The man showed Chhotu where to make a cooking hearth, where to wash the dishes and how to lock the gate at night. Everything was neat and clean, well-built and arranged in an orderly and convenient way. The pilgrims who stayed here were expected to follow the rules strictly. The man in-charge loved flowers. He confessed, "I wanted to grow a lovely little garden here, but this village is going to be submerged

because of the dam. So I didn't feel like having a garden."

There was an enchanting view of the river. I could see water-carriers filling their pots or climbing up the steep cliff path with two or three tiers of water-pots balanced on their heads. Boatmen were moving their craft along with long bamboo poles or paddles in midstream. The Narmada was quite wide here. She has the ability to squeeze herself through narrow passages and stretch out over broader ones.

There was a big *peepal*<sup>1</sup> tree opposite the hut. Time and again, a large flock of parrots flew off from its branches only to return to their leafy perches. I sat silently, simply looking around.

It had become very cold after the rain. Chill gusts of wind blew over the river. We had walked a very long way that day and were dead-tired, but we just could not sleep easily because of the cold.

We were about to leave the next morning when the village clerk presented me with a very fine *shivling* adorned with *bael*<sup>2</sup> leaves. "It was taken out of Dhavrikund. This is a small gift for you from me," he said.

After passing through Jinvani and Dharmपुरi we had nearly reached Keeti when we saw a board hanging from a tree with the words 'Swami Gangadhar Tirth Wisdom Hut, Sunaharibhan' painted on it. We turned off in the direction indicated by the board. The hut was located beside the Narmada. The riverbank was not very high, and flanked by a grove of lofty *arjuna*<sup>3</sup> trees. The Narmada sang as she streamed past, slipping and sliding and creating miniature waterfalls over the rocks. It was a soft chanting, as though the Narmada was reciting poetry.

We cooked our meal under a tree. After lunch, we went into the hut. The name of the *guru* who lived in the hut was Swami Gopalswarup Tirth. He had completed the Narmada pilgrimage. He was a scientist and had been to America with his *guru*. Only two people lived in this remote *ashram*: he and his disciple Deshpande. They had both been in the government service; Swamiji had also served in the army. Both now received pensions.

<sup>1</sup>*peepal*: A sacred fig tree prevalent in south-east Asia. It is worshipped by Hindus and is a common feature in temple complexes in India

<sup>2</sup>*bael*: Also known as the wood apple tree, it is native to India and considered sacred

<sup>3</sup>*arjuna*: A tall wide-canopied tree found in south and central India, and in West Bengal. It grows on river banks and has medicinal properties



In answer to my question, Swamiji told us: "Ours is a family of *sanyasis*. We have a history of four generations of family members renouncing the world. My uncle was a *Dandi*<sup>4</sup> *swami*. Another uncle was a *sanyasi*. He found eternal peace at the age of 88. My elder brother is also a *sanyasi*. My wife, son and daughter have also taken religious vows. Sometimes they visit me here, but I prefer them not to."

As night fell, both Swamiji and Deshpande began their prayers, followed by devotional songs. They both had very good voices. Deshpande's voice was exceptional. He had studied classical music. Both rose at 2.30 in the morning and were ready to begin their worship at three o'clock. That is precisely the right time for religious people to have a close communion with God.

As we were about to leave in the morning, Swamiji said: "Do have a cup of tea before you go."

"I don't drink tea," I said.

"This isn't city tea. See those *arjuna* trees over there? It is tea made from their bark. During *Sharad Purnima*, I distribute medicine to asthma patients, and this bark is the main ingredient."

We were about to leave after drinking the wholesome tea when Swamiji said: "Keeti is just ahead. A very old *sanyasi* lives there. Be sure to meet him before you proceed further. He is a recluse. He does not want anything. If he is given anything, he gives it away the very same day."

The *sanyasi* was indeed extremely old, with a facial expression of serene beauty. As soon as we sat down beside him, he gave us 12 rupees. Somebody must have given it to him, and so he passed it on to us. He looked as relieved as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his head.

An individual could receive the entire wealth of the world and still be dissatisfied; another would be quite happy to receive a loincloth.

From Keeti we went on to Fatehgarh where there is an island in the Narmada on which a Gond king had constructed a castle called the 'Joga Castle'. I had seen it on my way down from the opposite bank. I wanted to visit it again, so we went across by boat. The island was covered with so much overgrown grass that it was hard to reach the castle. Within the castle walls too, there was nothing but wild grass. (There were innumer-

<sup>4</sup>*Dandi*: A Brahmin philosopher and ascetic master who lived in the woods near Taxila in the Rawalpindi district of present-day Pakistan in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. His followers are called *Dandi swamis*

able bats on the steps descending from the third floor of the fort right down to the Narmada which prevented us from going down.) It was very exciting to look down from the upper storey of the fort at the Narmada flowing below.

We returned by boat and continued our journey. I asked a villager to give us directions for the onward route. He said: "Further on, you will find a *mahua*<sup>5</sup> tree. Turn right there, then left at the *dhava* tree, then go straight on from the *arjuna* tree, then from the teak tree . . ."

It sounded like a Litany of Trees.

We reached Siraliya in the evening. A *mauni baba*<sup>6</sup> had built a temple outside the village, where pilgrims stayed. We asked a young man the way to the temple. He was threshing soyabean with a thresher in his spacious yard.

"*Baba* lives alone there," he said. "He may not be at home. If he is out, you'll have to come all the way back. It will be dark by then. Please stay at our house." We agreed, as we also thought it was a good idea to stay there.

A sadhu had come to the village some time ago. Under his influence, our young host had made a vow. Each day, after finishing his day's work, he would have his evening meal only after bathing in the Narmada and visiting the temple to pay his respects to the Lord. Today the threshing had delayed him. He went off alone in the dark to bathe in the river. Upon returning, he sat down with us to have his meal.

He treated us just like members of his family. It was not easy to leave his place. We met the *mauni baba* at his temple. He was generally known as 'Mauni Baba' as he had taken a vow of silence 12 years ago and not uttered a word since then.

We set off, following a trail. A farmer riding a motorcycle came from behind us and stopped when he caught up with us. He was very pleased to meet us. "I live in that village you see over there," he said, pointing. "Please do me the kindness of visiting my house. Have some tea and snacks before you carry on."

<sup>5</sup>*mahua*: A tree that grows mainly in the forests and plains of north and central India. Its oils are used for cosmetic, food and fuel purposes, and its bark has medicinal properties. The flowers are sweet and used to make an alcoholic drink

<sup>6</sup>*mauni baba*: A hermit who has taken the vow of silence

"We have only just set out," I demurred. "If we go to your house we'll be delayed." Seeing his face fall at my refusal, I added hastily, "All right, we'll come."

He went ahead happily and we soon reached his house. Giving us each a glass of milk, he pleaded: "Do stay here today, *Baba*." "We want to reach Nemawar by this afternoon," I explained. "We are concerned about where to stay there."

"Don't worry, my sister lives there. Please stay at her home in Lal Maa's<sup>7</sup> Villa- it's right on the bank of the Narmada. I'll write a letter for you."

Taking the letter, we were about to leave when he said: "Come, I'll show you the way." He came quite far along the way with us.

"Why do you give so much service to pilgrims?" I asked. "Thousands must be coming by every year. Don't you get tired of giving *sadavrat* all the time?"

"Howsoever poor one may be, he takes care of his family," he replied. "We treat pilgrims like members of our own family. It is our duty to give them meals and take care of their comfort. When they leave we should escort them out of the village to say farewell and show them the way. And we should wait, until they have gone on a little away. We give them so much respect because we feel that we, too, have a share in their pilgrimage."

His words astonished me. Much later, while opening an art exhibition, I mentioned this incident and added: "The way this Narmada villager felt towards pilgrims is the way society should feel towards artists. Society should say to artists: 'We too have a share in the pictures you paint, the poems you write, and the sculptures you carve. We too would like to do the same, but for some reason we do not. You are doing our work. So it is our duty to take care of your comfort.' A healthy society should have this attitude towards the creators of its culture."

We located Lal Maa's Villa quite easily in Nemawar. There was a small house beside the villa where 'Shardaben' or Sister Sharda lived with her aged mother and two daughters. The girls had gone to school. Shardaben introduced us to her mother and both of them said: "We'll be most happy if you stay with us."

<sup>7</sup>Lal Maa: Literally, Red Mother

Shardaben's daughters came home from school in the afternoon. Their names were Sushila and Alka. Sushila was in the eleventh class and Alka in the eighth. Sushila's features reminded me of the women depicted in the Rajput school of painting<sup>8</sup> while Alka's face, with her delicate features, was more reminiscent of the art of the Kangra school<sup>9</sup>.

Both the girls received great affection from their grandmother. She had already arranged Sushila's engagement and the wedding was scheduled to be held soon. The grandmother was the true matriarch of the house.

There was a sudden downpour as darkness fell. When the rain began spattering onto the verandah, the grandmother invited us into her room. Her daughter and granddaughters were already there. Shardaben mentioned that both her daughters had memorised innumerable Sanskrit verses. When we insisted we should hear them, the two sisters began to recite the verses and continued for a long time. Shardaben then said that her mother could sing lovely songs and hymns. At our request, the old lady began to sing.

The grandmother had gone through hard times in her life. When her husband threw her out of the house, she sought refuge in Nemawar with her daughter. She managed to subsist by engaging in hard labour and gradually her situation improved. She had arranged her daughter's marriage. She had even bought some land. Unfortunately, her son-in-law died. Her daughter and the two granddaughters had been with her ever since. She was a dauntless woman, rather masculine and somewhat unattractive in appearance, with visible facial hair. Her voice was quite deep too. She could not walk much but preferred to sit on a cot from where she would sing. When she sang, she became deeply engrossed in the music, identifying closely with the sentiments of the song. She was transformed, and looked beautiful.

Her memory too was remarkable. She could sing for hours without exhausting her treasury of songs.

<sup>8</sup>Rajput school of painting: A unique style of painting that developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Rajputana, in the region of the present-day state of Rajasthan. It combined both indigenous and foreign influences and used natural colours from stone, shells and plants, and was famous for finely-detailed miniature art works

<sup>9</sup>Kangra school (of painting): Originating in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and named after the former princely state in the sub-Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, the Kangra school of painting was also known for its exquisite miniature art

"Where did you learn so many songs?" I asked her.

"I learned these songs from a *Surdas*<sup>10</sup>. The blind are the best singers."

It had become very cold. Shardaben gave us mats to sleep on and blankets to cover us.

Many women went out in groups very early in the morning to take their first bath in the month of Kartik<sup>11</sup>. The wind was freezing. I wondered, 'Don't these women feel the cold?' I listened to their songs from the warm depths of my blankets. Then a young girl came onto our verandah, calling out: "Alka! Alka! Come and bathe!"

The door opened and off went Alka with her friend. She must have been ready and waiting for her.

When it was daylight, I too went to the shore of the Narmada near the Siddhnath Temple where there was a dharmshala. A number of pilgrims were staying there for the Chaturmas retreat. Women were bathing in the river, lighting oil lamps and floating them on the river as an offering, performing the sacred rituals of worship or singing in chorus. It was a charming scene in the early morning mist.

Nemawar is famous for being the 'navel' or the midpoint of the Narmada. I wandered off a long way along the riverside.

Shardaben did not permit us to cook our lunch. She sat us down in her dining area and served us dal-bati (lentils with bread rolls). I can still taste the delicious flavours.

In the evening, there were several pilgrims sitting on the waterfront. Among them was an elderly pilgrim who was giving a religious talk. He spoke of the higher human values, quoting Sanskrit couplets by way of illustration. His powerful voice resonated in the temple precincts. I was impressed by the wisdom of this rustic-looking pilgrim. He was not retelling known stories; on the contrary, he was discussing abstract concepts. Had he been an educated man, he could well have been a university professor in religious philosophy.

That night, the grandmother sat in her usual place, singing devotional songs again. One pilgrim who sang very well and was an expert dholak<sup>12</sup> drummer had come too. They both sang together:

<sup>10</sup>*Surdas*: A blind mystic poet-singer

<sup>11</sup>*Kartik*: The eighth month of the Hindu calendar which occurs from the second half of October to the first half of November

<sup>12</sup>*dholak*: A two-headed Indian hand-drum

*"The curd and butter-thief was caught by Radha,  
Who went to Vrindavan to sell the curd,  
Then, the thief entered, and was caught by Radha!"*

The grandmother had become so involved while singing that at the words "was caught by Radha", she pounced forward, clenching her hands as if it was she literally catching the thief. She played out the whole scene in front of us. Her song touched our hearts.

"Sing some more grandma!" the girls pleaded.

And the old grandmother began singing again:

*"There is no one  
There is no one to evaluate the diamond  
The deceitful came, the cunning came, but the sage didn't  
When the sage came to the village, I didn't visit him."*

The interpretation of the song is that we appear to be waiting for the devotee, but instead we invariably end up supporting the deceitful. When the devotee eventually turns up, we are distracted, and are left empty-handed of the benefits of the devotee's visit.

The whole family gathered to see us off the following morning. "Come again," they all said warmly. The grandmother urged: "Do come back, and give blessings to the kids."

The grandmother's somewhat harsh voice had softened with sweet affection. My heart was full with deep appreciation of the way these good people had cared for us. But sad moments should not be prolonged, so with a choked throat and a heavy heart, we walked away.

We crossed the Jamner river by a dinghy. As we walked on, we came to a deep, dry ravine and sat down to rest. A few young girls passed by, gathering balls of cowdung and asking each other riddles. "Black horse, white rider: what are they?" asked one. Another replied: "Pan and *roti*!" I thought the answer could just as well have been "a black-marketeer". When someone has amassed far too much black money, his clothes become correspondingly dazzling white.

The riddles remain the same but their answers might change.

We spent the night at Pipalanerya.

We had walked about five kilometres the next morning when we

came to Cheepaner. There, in front of the temple, lay the broad expanse of the Narmada, with a flight of steps leading down to the water's edge and several huge *peepal* trees on her bank. The place was so pleasant that we decided to stay there for the day.

That night, I slept out in the open. There was impenetrable darkness all around. I gazed up at the scattered stars until quite late. The sky seemed to be an enormous blackboard inscribed with the white letters of the stars. I tried to read this celestial alphabet but could not decipher it. But it made no difference though. There is so much joy in reading the stars that there is no desire for further joy.

The sky could have also been a night class, where people who were busy earning a living by day could go to for classes by night.

The Narmada is a very good student of the sky. No sooner does the sky write something, she copies it exactly at the same moment.

We continued our journey the following morning. A woman ferried us over the Seep River in a dinghy.

"What is the difference between the Seep and the Narmada?" I asked her.

"The Seep is a river, the Narmada is our Mother," she replied simply.

The Narmada is not just a river: she is far more. She is the river where holy recluses perform their austerities; she is the pilgrims' object of worship; she is the reservoir that quenches the thirst of the fields; she is swimming pool for the youth; she is the village women's meeting place; she is the host for the various religious fairs and who knows what else? Even after listing all these attributes, I feel I have still not done full justice to her.

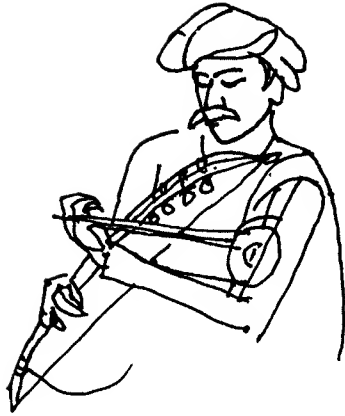
The eternal question was answered by that illiterate ferry woman with just one word: "Mother". The Narmada is not just a river, she is our Mother.

That rustic woman dismissed all my sophistry with a single word.

We reached Nilkanth that afternoon. The *dharmshala* was high on a cliff above the river. When we went to leave our belongings there, a sadhu emerged. He did not seem to notice Chhotu, only me and our entire load of luggage. "What a lot of weight you are carrying about, Granddad!" he exclaimed.

We were indeed carrying more food than we needed. Sadavrat was given almost everywhere in this area; people insisted on giving it. That was why our load had not become lighter. One sanyasi had even commented: "You walk with so much stuff—it means you don't trust the Narmadaji."

He suggested we leave our luggage in a nearby room. When I entered the room I was stunned. For a long moment my brain refused to accept what I was looking at. It was a living skeleton; a breathing, human skeleton.



## 8. Nilkanth to Pathora

I had never seen a man like that in my whole life. He was literally a living skeleton or, rather, there was no sign of a living man. His bones stuck out of his skin. From the length of his arms and legs, he appeared to be an unusually tall man, but now he was unable to stand up. He had been stricken with paralysis two years ago. He had been at Nilkanth for 14 years and had twice completed the Narmada *parikrama*. He ate no grain, subsisting only on *falahar*—a fruit diet—supplemented with peanuts, sago and milk.

As there was no flesh on his body, his bones looked even more elongated. It seemed as though those bones could come out of his skin and go back in again. His sad little eyes were sunken in their sockets and his expressionless face with its protruding bone structure was frightening. The skin was stretched so tightly over his bones that there was no scope for wrinkles. His kneecaps, disproportionately large and prominent, looked as though they were not a part of his body. His fingers had become claws. If both a photo and an x-ray of this man were taken, there would not be much difference between the two.

However, his voice was loud and his memory was very good. He could not speak clearly because of his paralysis and it was hard to understand what he said, but that did not inhibit his eagerness to talk. He could move a little, though with difficulty. A woman took care of keeping the place clean; the villagers had arranged this for him.

I began to sketch him; he put a turban on his head and draped a sheet over his body. He looked like a scarecrow.

I have seen healthy young people die at an early age. Here was this 80-year-old skeleton, very much alive and talking. There are such perplexing paradoxes in this world.

A young *sanyasi* arrived late in the afternoon. He too was taken aback to see the bony man. "I have never seen anyone like that before," he remarked.

The *sanyasi* was not on a pilgrimage. He had set out in search of a good mentor. He did no cooking himself but ate whatever he was given. He was extremely spare of speech. In the evening we offered him milk but he declined it. He sat in meditation, and then slept out in the open, wrapped in just a sheet. I on the other hand felt the cold severely, despite being indoors and under a blanket.

A strong wind began blowing after midnight, rustling the leaves of the trees. It did not blow steadily but in gusts. I noticed that the sound of the rustling teak tree leaves was different from the sound of *peepal* leaves. Different schools of music exist among trees as well. The *peepal* school of music is perhaps quite common.

The *dharmshala* was situated at the confluence of the Narmada and the Kular. We crossed the Kular by boat and went on our way. Our path was along the riverside. Dimawar was the next village. The *sadhu* there hailed from Tamil Nadu.

We stopped for the night at Nehlai. We stayed in a *sadhu's* room, which was quite large, and was on the river bank. A fawn was tethered inside the room. There were several deer in the woods near the village. Someone had caught this fawn and given it to the *sadhu*, who had become very attached to it. A sacred fire smouldered continuously in the room, day and night. Though the room was large there was not a single window and the door was kept shut. The room remained smoke-filled all night long. God knows what might be happening to the little deer, confined in

such a smoky room. Just one night there troubled us enough.

During the night I went outside for a while and sat out in the open. The stars looked like white sesame seeds scattered in the sky. There was no moon, so the stars could present themselves freely. Each night I would choose a single star or a constellation at which to gaze. Sometimes I would pluck a few stars and admire them.

The sun travels alone by day whereas all the stars travel in a caravan by night. On a moonless night, there is a huge assembly of stars as if gathered for a feast. The sky during the day is 'House of Lord'; by night it is 'House of Commons.'

At times taking the upper track and at other times walking down along the water's edge, we wended our way to Avrihat. There were unusual *shivlings* in the temples here. Small *shivlings* were inscribed on larger ones, and there were so many of them, like a pattern on a *Ram-naami*<sup>1</sup> shawl. After looking at them we moved on. Within an hour and a half, we saw clouds hovering in the sky. It looked as though we would be caught in the rain again without any shelter. We had already been drenched in the rain a few days ago. It had been raining every two or three days. We had never expected such untimely rain and cold. It was ruining the crops in the fields. This kind of untimely aberration in the weather had never occurred before.

The riverside path became suddenly dangerous. One small slip and we could tumble straight into the river. Before long, the faint pathway petered out completely. We climbed up the steep bank with difficulty, but at the top we found neither track nor footpath. Meanwhile, the clouds were rumbling ominously. They had massed together to form dense black clouds, threatening heavy rain. There was not a soul in sight. Somehow, we got to Patorha.

We had only managed to walk half as far as we had planned, but decided to stop for the night at this village for fear of the rain.

Some of the locals had clubbed together to build a new temple. The statue of the deity had not yet been installed. There was a wrought-iron door at the entrance of the temple verandah, which the caretaker opened

<sup>1</sup>*Ramnaami*: Inscribed with the name of Lord Ram. On a shawl or a cloth covering, the name 'Ram' in Devnagiri script is printed repeatedly to create a pattern. Such shawls are worn by the devotees of Lord Ram

for us. The verandah became our shelter from the rain that day. The caretaker gave us a bucket to fetch water and a very large carpet on which to sleep. He asked us if we needed *sadavrat*, but we had enough food with us.

Chhotu began cooking outside. The lentils had been cooked and he was baking the bread rolls when it started raining. This was the time when the soyabean crop was being harvested in nearly every field and after being cut, was piled on the ground in heaps. The untimely rain would destroy the crop and cause great losses to the farmers.

Chhotu somehow managed to finish baking the rolls. We laid down to sleep after our meal. The rain finally ceased. A single light bulb shone outside.

I woke up in the middle of the night to see a strange man lying awkwardly on the carpet. He had nothing at all with which to cover himself. He lay there muttering away as if he was telling a story. Then he suddenly burst out laughing. Now and then he recited verses from the epic *Ramayana*<sup>2</sup>. I wondered if he was mad. I kept quiet and tried to go back to sleep.

A little later the man got up and went outside but quickly came back. Standing in the doorway, he snarled at us: "Who are you? How did you sneak in here?"

This man, who had appeared harmless, suddenly became terrifying. Now he was furious.

Chhotu and I were dumbfounded at his behaviour and did not answer him. He began to shriek loudly. We sat up. I said: "The people who built this temple allowed us to stay here. Look, they gave us this rug and this bucket too."

But the man was quite insane and began to jabber crazily. He told us he was a CID inspector.

"Do you realise I am in plain clothes investigating thieves?" His questions were absurd. When he received no answer, he threatened to whip

<sup>2</sup>*Ramayana*: One of the two great Hindu epics in Sanskrit (the other being the *Mahabharata*), it tells the story of Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, who was exiled for 14 years by his father King Dashrath. Thematically, the *Ramayana* explores human values and the concept of *dharma*, the observance of the divinely-instituted natural order of the universe. The authorship is attributed to the Hindu sage Valmiki, and the generally accepted date of its creation is the 4th century BCE



us, so I kept giving him some answer or the other. He continued shrieking and screaming all the while. Now and then he made wild gestures in the air as if he was wielding a whip. As his anger grew his face became distorted with rage. I had never felt so utterly vulnerable before. We endured his threats helplessly. There were several houses nearby. Why did nobody come to help us? Why did nobody realise what was happening to us? It felt as if that night would never end.

Suddenly he noticed our knapsack in a corner. "What's in these knapsack? I must search them."

I was now really apprehensive. The kitchen knife was in one of the knapsacks. What if that came into his hands? A fresh wave of terror overcame me.

He opened our knapsack. He began to pull things out, one at a time, flinging each item away. I watched his every movement with bated breath. He threw a bottle of Dettol on the floor. He continued to take out our belongings, one by one, throwing each away. He even threw away the knife. Finally he took out a few books, looked at them, and then carefully replaced them, intact. Turning towards us, he asked Chhotu in English: "What is your name?"

"I don't understand English," said terrified Chhotu.

"What do you do?" the lunatic asked me.

"I was a teacher. I taught children. Now I am retired." My voice was steady but deep inside I was quaking. He was quiet, as though he was lost in thought. It seemed as if he was remembering something; there was some thought process underway. He stared fixedly at me for some moments, and said abruptly, "All right, go to sleep." I covered myself from head to foot and thinking that perhaps now he would go away, I tried to sleep.

I had had a similar experience once before. On the way to Amarkantak, I had been harassed by two drunkards one night. Now, on this night, it was this mad man. I am a cowardly sort of man, apt to become nervous very quickly. At first I had been terribly scared, but later I had begun to feel confident that this time too, like the time before, disaster would be averted. So I decided to face this new threat with patience and courage. Also, I was not quite alone. Chhotu was with me; he too had remained quiet and reserved. Of course, I had been praying fervent-

ly: 'O God! I come to you for refuge. We trust in you. Don't abandon us.'

Then a strange thing happened. The mad man suddenly began to massage my legs. I was startled at the touch of his strong hands. He massaged my legs very well, one after the other. He was very strong. Then, one by one, he massaged my arms, hands and fingers. I was terrified that any moment he might crush one of my fingers. When he was done with the massage, he opened my fist, put something in it, closed it and went away. After he had left, Chhotu bolted the door from the inside and padlocked it. We heaved a sigh of relief.

But sleep eluded me. I lay awake wondering why he had changed track so suddenly. What transformed him from being so wild and aggressive to becoming so respectful and sober?

I opened my fist and found a 20-paisa coin in it.

Gradually the mystery was solved. He had not thrown away my books. When he saw them it must have occurred to him that perhaps I was an educated man, perhaps even a teacher. Even in his confused state of mind, he must have understood that a teacher must be shown respect.

And once he realised that I was in fact a teacher, his behaviour changed immediately. The well-entrenched habit of according the utmost respect to one's teacher must have overridden his confused state of mind.

On Teachers' Day, innumerable teachers are honoured all over the country. I too had been honoured several times in my own city. But the respect I received that night, in the shadow of terror and panic, was unprecedented. I had never dreamt that I would receive the highest respect as a teacher in such a way. Finally, I did manage to sleep a little.

Morning arrived. Repacking all our scattered belongings in the knapsack, Chhotu exclaimed: "He didn't take a thing!" We unlocked the door and headed out to continue our journey. Nearby I met a youth and told him, "A lunatic gave us a lot of trouble in the night. He threatened and terrorised us for over an hour. He could have beaten us up."

"He is my father," the youth confessed. "He has fits of madness, then he behaves like that, but he doesn't actually hit anyone. He doesn't really live here. He lives with my brothers in Mandideep. He came here only last night."

"Why didn't you come and help us?" I asked him.

"I was sleeping in the fields, harvesting soyabean. I've just come back. "After my father came out from your room, he went to the *chabutra*<sup>3</sup>. He's still there."

Our way was past the *chabutra*. As we passed by we saw the man standing there, but we deliberately ignored him. Just then, he saw us and approached me, sinking to his knees and touching my feet. "Gurudev, I feel very ashamed," he said. "I couldn't help it. I was in a fit." His expression was full of remorse, and he had tears in his eyes.

"Brother," I said gently, "you have no idea how much you have honoured teachers—not just one, but all the teachers."

With that, we went on our way. Oh yes, that coin is still with me.



## 9. Pathora to Joshipur

Oh! a river again!

Walking on a riverside path compared to walking on a road are experiences that are poles apart, as different as land and sky. We walked all day, not even stopping to cook lunch. Some days we didn't even have the chance to bathe, and yet we managed to cover only 17-18 kilometers a day. Crossing the rivers took up quite a lot of time. If there was a fork in our path, we would be perplexed, wondering which way to take. And there would usually be nobody in sight whom we could ask.

Sometimes the path would suddenly disappear. Sometimes, our feet would sink into the sand. There would be mud in some places and thorns in others. Sometimes there would be long thick grass, and sometimes a tangle of bushes. At some places there were deep and dry ravines, and at other places, sheer cliffs, or the steep slopes and dips of the mountains. We baked in the fierce heat from the sun above and were drenched with perspiration. But bearing all that hardship was exactly why we had embarked on this trip. That very suffering was the source of our joy.

<sup>3</sup>*chabutra*: A tower-like structure crowned with a carved canopy held up by small pillars where birds—usually pigeons—can nest, feed and breed. At a lower level, the tower is surrounded by a circular platform where people can sit. *Chabutras* are found mainly in the villages of Gujarat and Rajasthan, usually at the entrance of a village or at its centre

We left Pathora in the morning and walked via Jahajpura and Makoriya towards the Bhagner River. The level of the Bhagner seemed unusually high, but it was not due to a greater flow of water from her own sources. It was actually caused by the water of the Narmada. The Narmada's level had risen due to the rain and the excess had flowed into the Bhagner. The Bhagner is an innocent river, not one to cause trouble to those who wish to cross over. There were quite a lot of rocks in that river. 'We could bathe and cook lunch here,' I thought. 'By the time the meal is cooked, our clothes will be dry.' The Narmada in this part of the journey has no rocks, so it was difficult to wash clothes. We were lucky to find the rocky Bhagner.

We reached Holipura in the afternoon. The temple was on a high cliff above the Narmada, with a *dharmshala* and huge *peepal* trees in the spacious compound in front. There were wild plum, *neem*<sup>1</sup> and mango trees as well. The *ashram* had a peaceful and holy atmosphere. There was a continuous murmur from the Narmada flowing over the rocks in the distance. The beauty of the place captivated us.

There was another pilgrim who had just arrived that day. He appeared to be from a well-to-do family and was travelling with a transistor. He was very fond of listening the news, tuning in both morning and evening. He was also scrupulous about cleanliness. At bedtime, he thoroughly wiped his feet clean with a damp cloth before he went to sleep.

The *sadhu* at the temple offered us *sadavrat*, but we still had so much food with us that if we kept accepting *sadavrat*, we would never be able to finish our own.

Thousands of pilgrims—men and women, the middle-aged and the elderly—travel very light. But I was unable to do that; it was simply beyond my capacity. Right from the first phase of my walk I realised that I could not equal the courage of those pilgrims. I am not a crow, but neither am I a swan. And I cannot strut like a swan.

One of the villagers at Holipura told me about the terrible flood of 1972, when their village was completely submerged. People climbed up on trees to save their lives. Twenty-seven people clung to a single tree for three days. One of them was a mother with her three-day-old baby. They all escaped unharmed. There was of course much damage done to the

<sup>1</sup>neem: The margosa tree, prevalent all over India and highly valued for its antiseptic and medicinal properties

fields, but the bumper crop in the following year almost made up for the losses. The flood had in fact brought them a gift: new alluvial soil. The village was wiped away hence a new holipura was rebuilt at a safe distance from the river.

It was pitch dark. But it would soon be morning. I had woken up early but it was so cold that I did not feel like going outside. Then I heard the voices of women singing as they gradually approached the village. It was only a small village. I wondered from where so many women had come? I found out that they had come from New Holipura, far away from the river. They had come by a tractor-trailer for the *Kartik* dip. It was *Diwali*. Bathing in the Narmada that day had, after all, a special significance.

It was extremely dark; the path was rough and rocky and there was no access even by steps to the Narmada. The earth on the bank was so sticky and cold that just walking on it made one shiver. However, neither the darkness nor the slipperiness nor the cold seemed to diminish the enthusiasm of those women in the least. They walked along, singing joyfully.

They reminded me of the minstrels at Shantiniketan, walking and singing in the morning.

The women came back a little later after bathing. They circumambulated the *peepal* trees, poured holy water on *shiwlings*, lit oil lamps and engaged in the rituals of worship. Worshipping in this way, religion and culture became one.

Then they vanished into the darkness from which they had emerged. I had been lost in a dream world as I watched the entire spectacle, spell-bound.

The *sadhu* who was also the caretaker of the temple complex had been coughing continually all night, but he too had bathed in the dark and started meticulously performing his rituals of worship. His upper body was bare.

"Don't you feel cold?" I asked him.

"I felt cold until I bathed," he replied.

I was reluctant to leave Holipura and hoped that it would rain so that we would be compelled to stay, but it did not, so we continued on our way.

The path was muddy in several places. After a while, we lost our way

and were casting about randomly from one side of the trail to the other for a long time. Fortunately, we finally met a farmer who gave us company for quite a distance so that he could show us the way. "We have seen tall plants of *arahar dal*<sup>2</sup> in some fields, but here the *arahar* plants are still very small. Why is there such a difference?" I asked the farmer.

"This variety of *arahar* with the small plants is only grown in the fields on the banks of the Narmada," he explained. "When the water level rises during the monsoon, the Narmada deposits fresh soil on its banks. The fields on the banks are sown later and therefore their plants are smaller. They won't grow as tall as the others. But they have bushy branches and yield a lot of lentils, that too in a shorter time."

He gave us the directions for the way further ahead before turning back.

The lush green fields on either side of the river were like borders on a scarf. On this section of the journey, I saw enormous fields of cotton. In another field, the harvested soyabean were lying in heaps and three monkeys were happily feasting on it.

We came to another river and sat down to rest. It was now breakfast time. "Take the snacks out!" I said to Chhotu.

But where were the snacks? They had run out at Nemawar. Since then we had travelled without any. I had thought, 'Instead of snacking, we can cook twice a day, and walk a little less,' but we had managed two meals for only two days. We were so enthusiastic about walking that we contended with just one meal.

We reached Budhni at mid-day after passing through Mahu and Patalkot. We saw railway tracks for the first time in 20 days. There were three bridges over the Narmada. We stood staring like kids at a train passing over the bridge. After a little while, we reached Budhni Ghat. There was a narrow but well-built flight of steps leading down to the Narmada and several *dharmshalas* nearby. We stopped at the first, where we saw the pilgrim with the transistor. He had come by road and so had arrived earlier. Our route along the riverbank had been very tough. It had taken us half a day to cover 10 kilometres.

The lady who had founded this *dharmshala* usually stayed there all day and took the greatest care of the pilgrims. She had done the *parikrama* twice long ago with her husband. Unfortunately, first her husband

<sup>2</sup>*arahar dal*: A variety of pulses also known as 'pigeon pea'

and then her elder son had both passed away. It was then that she constructed the *dharmshala*.

There was another *ghat* nearby. When I got into conversation with the priest at the temple, he said: "If a man unwittingly thinks something wrong, it is not a sin, but if he thinks something good he will surely be blessed."

The mind generates good thoughts and as a result we do good deeds. But the opposite view is also held. Someone had said: "There are no blessings in performing obligatory rituals, but it is a sin to neglect them."

These two statements do not actually contradict each other: in fact, they are complementary. One encourages us to do good and the other promotes the awareness of the commitment to perform good deeds.

There were other pilgrims at our *dharmshala*, including an aged couple from a village near Jabalpur. When the old lady came to know I too was from Jabalpur and would be returning there before dusk the next day after completing my walk, she was delighted. "Baba, my two granddaughters are married and living in Jabalpur," she said. "Please give them our message: 'Your granddad and grandma have crossed the sea and are coming slowly.' Tell them to send the news to our village too. We stayed at the monsoon retreat in Nemawar and wrote four letters from there to our village. We also sent a reply-paid postcard to get an answer, but we have not received a single reply. So we are worried. Oh *baba*! Do write all this down so that you don't forget anything. At the end, write this too: '*Narmade Har*'<sup>3</sup> to your in-laws, to both brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law and all the elder brother and their wives three sons-in-law."

She told everybody who was present: "I am extremely happy today meeting someone from our hometown."

All the other pilgrims suggested that I should beg for alms from at least five households every day. They also objected greatly to my loose pyjamas. They said that I ought to wear a white *lungi*.<sup>4</sup> "I'm a part-time *parikramavasi*"<sup>5</sup>, I confessed. "I am not a quarter as good as you people."

A devout person came in just then and donated some rupee notes to be distributed among all the *parikramavasis*. It came to one rupee each. The lady who had built the *dharmshala* wanted to give me one rupee too.

<sup>3</sup>*Narmade Har*: A greeting which translates into 'Praise be to Mother Narmada'

<sup>4</sup>*lungi*: An unstitched length of cloth worn usually by men and draped like a sarong

<sup>5</sup>*parikramavasi*: One who undertakes a *parikrama*

"I'm not that sort of *parikramavasi*," I told her. "How can I take it?"

"Whatever you are, you are also walking along the banks of the Mother. You are staying here in the *dharmshala*. So take it," she insisted.

"But I want to give rupees myself."

"Give then, nobody's stopping you." There was no evading her insistence. When the other *parikramavasis* saw me accepting the alms, they too were quite satisfied.

It was *Diwali*. The daughters and daughters-in-law of each household had decorated their front yards with *rangoli*<sup>6</sup>. As darkness fell, women carrying trays having small oil-filled lamps wended their way down the steps of the *ghat*. They lit the lamps and set them afloat on the Narmada. Our *dharmshala* too looked festive with lit lamps placed by the pilgrims.

It was odd that *Diwali* fell on that day but *Amavasya*<sup>7</sup> would be observed on the next day. The first day was that of *Swati Nakshatra*<sup>8</sup> and thus *Diwali* was celebrated on that day. I had only just realised that the day on which *Diwali* was celebrated could be shifted here and there, and celebrated separately from *Amavasya*.

At night, the people gathered on the *ghat* to sing devotional songs. One *parikramavasi* sang very well. He had spent the monsoon at Budhni and intended to leave after *Dev Uthani Ekadashi*, the official end of the monsoon retreat, 11 days after *Diwali*. He sang so melodiously that the local people begged him to stay longer, in fact, not to go away at all. He sang:

"Krishna, Krishna, you are so black.  
You were born on a dark night  
Is that why you are black?  
You drank the milk of a black cow  
Is that why you are black?  
You overpowered a black snake  
Is that why you are black?"

<sup>6</sup>*rangoli*: A folk art form of motifs made with coloured rice, dry flour and sometimes flower petals. The motifs are usually drawn on the floor at the entrance of a house to invite good fortune

<sup>7</sup>*Amavasya*: The night of no moon

<sup>8</sup>*Swati Nakshatra*: Literally, the 'pure star'. The reference is to one of the 27 stars recognised by Hindu astrology which is a symbol of creativity, art and freedom

People began to clap right from the first line.

We were on our way again the next morning. There was a nip in the air. We walked alongside the river carefully. Joshipur, where we would conclude our walk, was just ahead, directly opposite the famous Sethani Ghat at Hoshangabad. There was a road from Budhni Ghat to Joshipur, but we preferred to walk along the riverside path. This route was so tough that it took us four hours to walk five kilometres, crossing two deep nullah on the way.

We reached Joshipur around noon. Here, we ended our journey. We crossed over to Hoshangabad by boat and went home to Jabalpur by train.

October 3, 1997 was my 70th birthday. We had set out on our *parikrama* a few days later, on October 12. At the age of 70 I had walked 230 kilometres in 20 days. I had walked in blazing sunshine by day and shivered with cold by night. I had also crossed the dense forest of Lakkarkot. This meant I was not yet old and decrepit, or perhaps old, yes, but not decrepit. I may not be youthful, but I am not worn out.

This realisation uplifted me. A new joy blossomed in my heart. I began at once to dream of my next journey.



## 10. Joshipur to Sardarnagar

My friends Mr A, B, C and D did not come with me on my earlier treks. In this trek Mr E, F, G and H did not come.

Mr E had been the most enthusiastic. "I'll come," he promised, "and my elder brother will come too. We did the Badrinath-Kedarnath pilgrimage together."

However, four days before our departure, Mr E's feet were swollen and the doctor forbade him to go. So his brother also dropped out. Mr F had wanted to come on the previous walk but he could not due to the death of his aged father. This time, a grandchild was about to be born in the family, so he too could not make it. Last time it was death and this time it was birth that prevented his coming along. G and H were to join us at Hoshangabad but G suddenly had to go to Delhi, and H could not get leave from his office. So neither of them could come.

Well, my friend Jogesh Thakar had confirmed that he was coming from Ahmedabad and would walk with us. Thakar is a professional photographer and gave up important work to walk with us. I had cautioned him that as we usually slept out in an open verandah or under a tree, not

to bring an expensive camera along. But the camera and lens he brought were worth nearly Rs 80,000. I was flabbergasted at the recklessness of this 42-year-old photographer but happy too, to find an excellent companion in him. Chhotu, as always, would also be coming along.

(Hoshangabad is an extraordinary district. Makhanlal Chaturvedi, Harishankar Parasai and Bhavaniprasad Mishra, the acclaimed writers and poets, were all born in this district. Dada Dharmadhikari, the Gandhian philosopher, also spent his childhood in this region.)

Gopikanth Ghosh of Hoshangabad was not able to get leave so he could not come with us, but thanks to him two organisations in Hoshangabad convened a very pleasant gathering for us one evening. The audience listened attentively to my talk and bought 50 copies of my book *Saundarya ki Nadi Narmada* (*Narmada : River of Beauty*). It is indeed pleasing to any writer when his book is bought and read. So when we walked on from Joshipur, opposite Hoshangabad, I was on top of the world. The date was April 16, 1998.

In the early morning, the fine waterfront of Hoshangabad across the river looked even more beautiful from our side. It was like a huge oil-painting.

A flight of steps does not obstruct the flow of a river; instead, it makes access easy. A *ghat* is a river's ornament, enhancing the elegance of the river. The visual impact of Hoshangabad's extensive series of *ghats* is beyond description.

Thakar is a photographer but he looks like a hunter. He wore bright-coloured trousers and a shirt, and the camera tripod projecting from his kit looked like the barrel of a rifle. His black beard and moustache completed the image. Yet, his swashbuckling appearance was deceptive. Despite his tough guy looks, he was in fact a tender-hearted man. He proved to be a valuable companion.

This was the first day of our journey. We always had the most weight to carry on the first day. The sun blazed like a bonfire, and the hot air was suffocating and felt miserable. Gusts of dry, hot wind—the loo—swept over the arid fields. As we approached Ramnagar, we began to flag, so we rested there for some time till our energy was restored.

Further on, we could see Bandrabhan on the far side of the south bank. It was still some way ahead. First, the Tawa River came into sight



on the opposite side of the river, and we knew that Bandrabhan would soon appear on the side on which we were. The mountains were now quite close. And look! Bandrabhan too was now in sight!

It is a singularly beautiful place. The Narmada flows rapidly over the rocks here. Rough tumbling water over rough tumbling rocks! Rough water is more attractive than smooth water. The Narmada's peacock spirit dances only when it meets the rocks.

There was no village, but there was a temple and a *dharmshala* up on a hill, and an enormous *peepal* tree with a *chabutra*. We decided to sleep there. It was an isolated place, with a road winding between the hills. Had we had reached here a few days later we would certainly have stayed for two-three days. It was a pity that we had come to such a lovely place on the very first day itself, when we had to set the pace for our journey.

It was cool on the *chabutra*, canopied by the tree. We slept there. As the last part of the night was almost over, it would be sunrise in a little while. Had I been a journalist, I would have written a report that would go something like this for my newspaper:

#### SUNRISE AT BANDRABHAN

April 17, 1998: Bandrabhan. It is not yet sunrise, but it soon will be. All the night lights of the sky are growing dimmer. The moon is losing its sheen. The dawn has unlocked the eastern sky. Intending to welcome the sun, it is mixing different shades of colours to create a new hue. It seems it is not yet getting the colour it wants. We can understand the pain of creation.

Suddenly, the doors of the east open up and the upper tip of the sun becomes visible—as if it is sneaking into the sky as quietly as a thief. The beauty of a sunrise is in the slow ascent of the sun. The sun knows that if it comes up suddenly with a blinding flash, the people won't be able to bear it. Thus, taking due precautions, it rises slowly.

After this, I had written: "As the sun makes its way up, it shouts

'Taxi!'" But later on, I deleted this line. The sun is a walker by nature. It needs neither a cart with seven horses nor a 14 nor 21 horse-powered taxi. Then I wrote: "The dawn is changing colours as if it is changing the diapers of the new born sun," but I deleted this as well. I next wrote: "The sun has intruded the sky as if some cattle have intruded a farm." But I removed this line too, thinking that it might not amuse the readers. On second thought, I felt that perhaps I should not have removed that line. Interests keep changing. What may not be so interesting for today's readers might turn out to be fascinating for the readers of tomorrow.

Then I continued writing: "I pity the sun. Should he be roaming around endlessly? How long should he continue to bear the burden alone? Why doesn't he get a wife like the moon? (By the way, dear sun, have you kept an account of your age? If the girl's family asks us, what should we tell them?) Shouldn't you have the privilege of owning a home? Who would want to give you a home? Won't you burn it to ashes the moment you enter it? However, the sky has kept the sun in its house. Not just that, it has given him the freedom to roam around. Sky, you are truly great to let this ball of fire stay in your home." I deleted this too because while it could be true for the sun during the course of the day, it would not be true in the early morning.

"The sun has left for his solitary walk. The sky is so deserted that the sun can't even ask anyone the way to his home. The sun, when newly born, looked like a child with pink cheeks; now he looks sharp and youthful. Who has the courage to look into his eyes? Now he is not only the property of the eastern sky, but of the entire sky.

**Postscript:** "The sun has divided its wealth. The eastern sky has got the sunrise, whereas the western sky has got the sunset. The northern and the southern skies are left empty-handed. As a consolation prize, they have each been given the privilege of holding the sun on their side of the equator for six months at a time and this division has taken place so peacefully that few are aware of it.

**Postscript again:** "It is quite possible that at the same time I am describing the sunrise in Bandrabhan, someone in America might be describing the sunset. Sunset and sunrise are the two sides of the same coin, the sun."

It was quite a different matter that such a report might have landed me out of my job and that my editor would have demanded my resignation. I had kept it ready:

"A few days back I sent you a report of the sunrise at Bandrabhan. I tried to make it interesting and poetic. I agree that in the flow of joy, I used a lot of colour in my painting. But apart from mentioning facts in a report, a certain amount of artistic freedom should also be allowed. Adding the flavour of pickle to the food lifts it to another level of enjoyment. (I am the first person to discover the lines on the wheels of sun's chariot, which no one had ever noticed before). Rather than appreciating such journalism, you didn't even publish it. And that too, when our newspaper's name is *Sun*. I can endure contempt when it is aimed at me but not when it is directed at the sun. Therefore, I am leaving your newspaper—forever."

And this would be the probable answer of the editor:

"We didn't publish your crap, which you call reporting, because it was not worth publishing. By adding your own shades while describing the sunrise you created a bad colour. You didn't do much but dishonour the sun. Why did you portray him in such a dismal manner? Just to startle the readers? The columns of our newspapers do not stand to startle people. Don't forget that however aggressive the sun looks, he has immense fatherly tender feelings for us. We are living at his mercy. You have made a derogatory comments on the sun. Thus, with immediate effect, we accept your resignation."

I was all set to answer back, but a ray of sun reminded me that if I

went on describing the sunrise, it might be sunset before long.

We found a road that led away from Bandrabhan and reached Shahganj, a large market town, in about two hours. From there, we abandoned the road and followed the path along the edge of the Narmada. We reached Baneta in the evening and stayed the night at the *dharmshala* which was in the middle of the village. There were other pilgrims there, including some 'committed' ones.

"The 'committed' ones usually do their *parikrama* very fast," somebody said. "They have already received their reward but the obligation still has to be fulfilled, so they do it in any way."

"I don't understand," I said.

"For example, say somebody's son falls ill. The father makes a vow to the Narmada: 'If my son recovers, I will set out on your *parikrama*.' Fortunately, the son gets better, so the father has got what he wanted. The vow is still to be fulfilled. So he goes on a *parikrama* to honour his commitment, but he does it so hastily—partly on foot, partly by train, and partly by bus. He has already got what he wanted from the Mother—now he has to repay the debt one way or another."

'First do the work and then enjoy the reward.' This principle of work and reward had been turned on its head: here one had received the reward first and then had to do the work to earn that reward. If the reward was obtained in advance, the attitude towards the work would not be the same as it out to be.

We moved on the following day, making our way through Hatanora to Sardarnagar. We walked through the lovely winding alleys of the village to the very large temple on the riverbank, where we stayed. A man told us the name of the village: "It used to be called 'Garajala'. Every year some part of the village or the other would catch fire, sometimes among the houses, sometimes in the fields. Then a *sadhu* said the name of the village should be changed. He suggested this name, Sardarnagar. There was a big ceremony and the name of the village was changed with great celebration. There has never been fire since then."

Any couple, I thought, between whom the sparks fly, should put this method to the test to cool off their friction. A new bone of contention might arise, however, as to which of the two should change his or her name.

There were many acacia trees at Sardarnagar. The yellow blossoms of spring, which I saw everywhere on my last journey, were now no more, but the trees were as green as ever—perhaps even greener. Groves of acacias confer a fresh beauty to a village. The Narmada was framed like a picture between the acacias.

There were three other pilgrims there, one of them 'committed'. "I have three sons. The eldest has four daughters and the other two have one each—six granddaughters and not a single grandson. My sons are too busy with the farm work to go on a *parikrama* so I am doing one in their stead. Perhaps we shall all be blessed by the Mother."

First we want sons, then grandsons, then great-grandsons, then great-great-grandsons, to safeguard the family lineage and have heirs for our property. While sons are in demand, daughters are treated like uninvited guests. Now a daughter can be 'banished' before birth, and this deed is sometimes done by the unborn girl's own parents. Is a daughter so unwanted? Is a son so precious?

The geography of any large country can be divided into three main features: the mountains, the plains and the coastline. Our sages imagined a goddess for each of these. The goddess of the mountains is Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya. The goddess of the plains is Sita, who was found in a field which King Janak<sup>1</sup> was ploughing. And the goddess of the sea is Lakshmi, who emerged from its depths during the mythical 'Churning of the Ocean'<sup>2</sup>. It is significant that none of the three goddesses have brothers. None of their mothers or fathers had hankered for a son.

We had to move on. The two pilgrims who were staying with us were off at first light. Pilgrims walk barefoot, so they set off very early. We were not walking barefoot so our problem was not the heat of the ground but the heat from the sky. After 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning the sun blazes like a furnace. So we too packed our knapsacks, slung them on our backs and set out on the lonely path beside the Narmada.

<sup>1</sup>King Janak: According to the myth, King Janak of Mithila, a historical city now partly in India and partly in Nepal, was ploughing a field as part of a *yagna*, or ritual sacrifice, when he discovered Sita in a furrow. He and his wife, Queen Sunayna adopted Sita, who was later married to Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya

<sup>2</sup>'Churning of the Ocean': A mythological incident where the gods, on the advice of Lord Vishnu, formed an alliance with the demons to churn the Ocean of Milk to extract the nectar of immortality

As the sun climbed higher, even the singing birds were silenced by the blasts of heat. Time stretched endlessly. Nobody spoke. We walked numbly, silently, as if through a long tunnel of silence.

We were all troubled by the sun and the hot wind, but Thakar was affected most. It was hardly 10 or 10.30 in the morning when he began to complain, insisting that it must be noon and time to stop and rest. "Embarking on a pilgrimage is not easy. A little bit of stress and striving is essential, so suffer a bit, my friend."

As mid-day approached, the anger of the sun peaked. The earth burned. Hot winds flayed our bodies. Our faces baked in the heat. Our throats dried up. Thakar was completely drenched in perspiration. Given a chance, he would have set fire to the sun.

Don't you listen to all this, sun!



## 11. Sardarnagar to Mangrol

As we walked along, we saw a variety of trees. Most had retained their leafy cover but the branches of the others were bare. With the arrival of spring, bare branches sprout new leaves, but there were no leaves as yet on the *peepal* and teak trees; they were still in their winter mode.

Spring makes two or three rounds to bestow her joy to all the trees. Most trees receive the blessings of Spring on her first trip. A number of trees wait patiently until her second or third visit, and among these are the *peepal* and teak trees. It is as if they have said to Spring: "Both of us are made of strong bones. We can burn in the sun; we can bear the rage of the heat. So take care of the others first. After you have dressed them all in their new garments, then please come to us." And Spring, as if agreeing to this mute offer, descends on the bare-limbed trees at the end of her final annual visit. That is why, while most trees flourish with fresh new greenery in vivid shades, trees such as the *peepal* and the teak continue to remain sun-scorched and bare.

'Brother *Peepal*, Brother Teak, you bear at length the assault of the heat upon you. The source of your stoicism is your compassion for the

suffering of others. Your stark appearance is founded on your magnanimity, affection and blessings for all the other trees. Only after new garments have been created for all the others, are your clothes sewn, the very last of all. You are both truly large of heart.'

The fire like redness of the flowers of the flame of the forest tree was delightful. But the flowering season was coming to an end. Just a few blossoms clung to the twigs here and there. A single flame of the forest tree could indeed light up an entire landscape.

The first villages we reached were Jait, then Narayanpur, where there was a farmhouse on the bank of the Narmada with sprawling fields and farmland, and massive trees. We stopped there for a rest and got into a conversation with the farmer. He was very well-spoken.

"You speak very good Hindi," I complimented him.

"I speak very carefully," he replied.

"This is a very beautiful place," I remarked.

"I settled here because of this beauty."

"Don't you feel lonely, living here alone?"

"So far I have had no reason to feel bored."

Every sentence he spoke in Hindi was pure literature.

Today, I think it would have been nice to have stayed on there and listened to more of his talk. What had been the great hurry to leave? It is my irony that I do not appreciate the importance of what is before me; I realise its value only when it has gone. I am only too aware of this fault in me, yet I make the same mistake time and again. All my knowledge and experience goes in vain.

There was a Hanuman temple on a hillock before Nandner, whose widespread trees were visible from afar. When we arrived there, the resident *baba* was rude at first, but when he came to know that Thakar was a photographer and had come with his camera, his attitude changed immediately. His voice became extraordinarily sweet. He posed with his staff, *kamandal*, trident and other ritual implements. So Thakar has to take his photograph. 'Well, he won't get to see his photos anyway,' I thought. Why was he so obsessed with recording his image? Perhaps he thought his name would go down in history if he was photographed.

We reached Kusumkhara by the afternoon. There was a large temple

on the cliff of the Narmada, where we stayed. We slept in the open, under the night sky. As we were about to leave in the morning, the priest said: "What's the hurry? Stay today too; you can leave tomorrow."

His invitation was tempting but we had to go on. We reached Barkachh at mid-day, by way of Bamhori. It was a large village with a temple and a *dharmshala* on the bank of the Narmada. It would become crowded later that day due to the weekly market. Village markets start bustling after noon. We were told that a *mauni baba* from Gujarat lived there. We met him and I asked him his name.

"Sanyasi Ganeshpuri," he wrote.

"How long have you been here?"

"Twenty years."

"Where are you from?"

"Physically I am a southern Brahmin, originally from Satara in Maharashtra, but I now belong to everywhere. I took *diksha*<sup>1</sup> 40 years ago from my *guru* Shankarpuri in Kutch, Gujarat. I stayed there for 15 years, and then spent several years meditating in the forests of Girnar, the Himalayas and Maharashtra. I would like to go into a dense forest sometime again later, to meditate."

"How long have you kept silent?"

"For more than 25 years, and I will remain silent until the end."

He wrote down all his replies in Gujarati. Then he went away.

Thakar bought a watermelon from the market. We ate it there itself and resumed our walk in the afternoon, reaching Ghora in the evening.

The temple at Gora was very large. The priest was humble, reclusive and straightforward. A pleasant smile played on his face. He treated us very affectionately, insisting on giving us *sadavrat* and also providing fuel. When Chhotu baked the *chappatis* and they failed to puff up properly, the priest guided him on the right way to prepare them.

As it was summer, we slept out in the open. I love gazing at the night sky. That night, the sky looked like a watermelon cut in half. The stars were the melon seeds. I laughed at myself for making such a comparison, one that could occur only in the mind of a starving man!

<sup>1</sup>*diksha*: The initiation of a novice into a religious order, usually after several years of spiritual study and religious practice

This priest too tried to persuade us to stay but we had to keep going. Further on, along the riverbank, we met a villager who invited us for tea. When we politely turned down his offer, he said, "Oh, I have two lemons in my pocket. I'll make you lemon juice." He made the drink and was about to serve it to us when he said, "Wait, I'll put a pinch of salt in it and it will taste like grapefruit juice. It's a country recipe." It really did taste like grapefruit juice.

"We are not able to do the whole *parikrama* in one go like the other pilgrims, We walk for only 20 to 25 days at a stretch and then go home."

"It is a great thing to walk even for a day," said the villager. "If you tell people, 'Walk for just one day for the sake of the Mother', most people will not come—not even for one day. Twenty to 25 days is a real achievement. People are so attached to worldly possessions that they build house after house. They also teach their sons to keep building house after house. Their sons repeat the same story and the system carries on. These people are just selfish, completely selfish."

"Come along with us for a couple of days," I requested him. "We'll be very pleased."

"I have just returned from my daughter's wedding the day before yesterday, and tomorrow is my niece's wedding, otherwise I would certainly have accompanied you. A *sadhu* once said to me: 'Never mind if you can't do the *parikrama* yourself, give service to those who do.' So the work I do is no less holy. I give directions to some *parikramavasis* or give water, food or cooked meals."

As we were leaving, he said: "Come, I'll show you a way that will benefit you by two kilometres."

"Benefit us?"

"It will save you a two-kilometre detour. If you go by the upper route, you'll get two kilometres of trouble."

"Trouble?"

"You will not only have to walk an extra two kilometres but you will also go further away from the Mother. Follow the path along the river-bed."

Thanking him, we went on our way.

Thakar had seen a small nutcracker owned by a villager which had taken his fancy. An old blacksmith at Semari had made it; the village lay

ahead but going there meant we would have to leave the river-bed. We suddenly lost the direction. We walked along and came across a father and his son who were searching for two of their buffaloes that had strayed—or perhaps they had been stolen—four days ago. They had walked 30 to 40 kilometres every day in search of their buffaloes, but as yet there was no trace of them.

We reached Semari in the evening. The temple priest welcomed us and escorted us to the blacksmith's house. The blacksmith was quite elderly. He still had three nutcrackers for sale. Thakar bought two of them to gift to two of his elderly relatives.

"You can cut this half-rupee coin with your nutcracker if you like," claimed the blacksmith. "It won't damage the blade at all."

"You cut it please," said Thakar.

"Give me your nutcracker," said the blacksmith.

"No!" exclaimed Thakar. "Not with the ones I have bought. Cut it with your own nutcracker."

The blacksmith laughed, and neatly clipped the edge of a 50-paisa coin with his nutcracker, holding it out for us to see that the blade was undamaged. We believed it was of genuine iron.

We slept out in the open again that night. I fell asleep watching the stars.

In the south of India and in Maharashtra, before making a *rangoli* decoration, housewives sketch the outline of the design with a series of dots. They then connect the dots to finalise the *rangoli* motif. It seemed to me that someone had made the dots with stars in the sky for me to connect to make a celestial *rangoli* if I wished.

The next morning we walked on and encountered the Barana, the first river on this walk. The water level was high and it was very difficult to cross. After Bhilariya, another river appeared, the Datauni. We crossed two rivers in one day. We reached Mangrol in the evening.

There was a big temple with a large campus and a well-built flight of steps that ran from the temple down to the river. The Narmada could be seen rippling a long way in both directions from this *ghat*. It was a very beautiful place. We stayed there for two days.

Upon our arrival, a young priest at the temple approached us. There

was a middle-aged pilgrim too, who looked like a real rustic. The priest had committed the entire epic, the *Ramayana*, to memory. He seized the opportunity to recite a part of it to us. The episode he selected was of Ram giving his sandals to Bharat<sup>2</sup>. The rustic pilgrim asked very humbly: "Punditji<sup>3</sup>, there is one thing I don't understand. I live deep in the countryside so how could I understand—but you will surely be able to explain it. Lord Ram gave Bharat his sandals, but where did the sandals come from? Ram was walking barefoot after all, 'without footwear'. So where did the sandals come from?"

His question surprised me. The priest had no answer to give him. Pursuing the subject further, the pilgrim said: "Bharat wanted Ram to ascend on the throne; and crown him as a king, but Ram would not agree. Instead, Ram gave Bharat his sandals to represent himself, but while sandals may be the symbol of a sage or a *sanyasi*, it is not an appropriate symbol for a king. If Ram had to give an object, he could have given his bow. A bow would be a better symbol of a king rather than sandals."

I was quite astonished. This simple man had exposed a complex contradiction. What a fine logician was concealed within that rustic-looking pilgrim! Outer appearances can be quite misleading.

The language of the poet Tulsidas is so lyrical that the reader may get carried away with the flow, but *Ram Charit Manas*<sup>4</sup> is not only composed of melodious words but carries an ocean of profound meaning. It should be read very slowly to extract the essence and savour the deep meaning in each word. However, the reader tends to become so overwhelmed by the beauty of the poetic language that he pays scant attention to the significance of the thoughts. That rustic-looking pilgrim was a inquisitive and thoughtful reader. His faith in the *Ramayana* was not a whit less than that of the priest, but clearly he had not merely read the epic but had pon-

<sup>2</sup>Bharat: A younger brother of Ram. Bharat's scheming mother, King Dashrath's third wife, Kaikeyi, had persuaded the king to exile Ram, the crown prince, for 14 years so that her son Bharat could be the heir to the throne. Bharat was unwilling to usurp the throne upon Dashrath's death and asked Ram, who was determined to uphold his father's decision to exile him, to give him his sandals to place on the throne as a symbol of his presence for the period of exile.

<sup>3</sup>Punditji: A respectful form of address to a learned person.

<sup>4</sup>*Ram Charit Manas*: It literally translates into 'the lake of the deeds of Ram'. It is an epic poem written in seven volumes by the 16th century poet, Goswami Tulsidas (1532-1623), and is a retelling of the *Ramayana*. The seven volumes correspond to the seven steps leading to the sacred and purifying Himalayan lake, the Mansarovar.

dered over what he had read. He went along with the author except in this one instance, when it appeared to be hard for him to accept the premise. Such a thoughtful and discriminating reader deserved great respect.

Dark clouds began gathering that evening. As night fell, the sky became quite overcast and a strong wind began to blow. Thunder rumbled in the clouds; lightning cleft the sky. Such a turmoil of thunder and lightning was rare even during the monsoon. The sharp cries of peacocks intensified the forbidding atmosphere. Then it began to drizzle. Elemental nature vibrated. Sitting on the *ghat*, we watched and trembled.

I had seen innumerable aspects of the Narmada: this was the first time I was seeing her by flashes of lightning. It was a very weird experience. The broad expanse of the Narmada would be lit up for a second, then plunged into darkness again. The Narmada in the form of an electric-vine was a unique sight! Where else could such a magical combination—of lightning lighting up the Narmada, the thunderous clouds, the steady fall of raindrops, the strong gusts of wind and the cries of peacocks—be found?

'Look, Mother Narmada! The lightning is lighting lamps in your honour; the clouds are beating their *mridanga*<sup>5</sup>; the wind is whisking its yak's tail; the peacocks are chanting anthems and the rain is washing your feet!' I witnessed this grand worship of the Narmada with bated breath, filled with a strange awe. Waves of joy and utter delight coursed through me. My heart felt washed and cleansed of impurities; my mind and spirit became supremely content. I had witnessed a moment of pure magic, a rare privilege in this life.

The Narmada had flowed deep into my soul...



## 12. Mangrol to Mauni Mata's Ashram

That scene of the divine worship of the Narmada was my last thought as I fell asleep, and it was the first image that sprang to mind as I woke up. It had also appeared in my dream. The dream was like a repeat performance of that magnificent and beautiful spectacle, this time just for me.

In the morning, the sky was absolutely clear. There was not a trace of clouds. It was hard to imagine that just last night there had been such an uproar of thunder, and such frightening lightning. They had come onto the stage like professional actors, overwhelmed the audience with their performance and departed.

The clouds had left the sky but not my mind. I wrote in my notebook:

"The sea sends rain-bearing clouds to the earth. He knows how eagerly she is awaiting them, so he does not send them by ordinary post but by registered airmail. A river is a receipt—an acknowledgment to the sea from the earth that it has received the cargo from the clouds. Seeing the muddy river water, the sea is assured that the cargo he sent to the earth has reached safe and sound."

<sup>5</sup>*mridanga*: A conical-shaped drum used for percussion in Indian classical music



After I had written that, I recalled that at times poet Kalidas<sup>1</sup> had compared clouds to messengers. Such poetic similes must be quite scarce in Indian literature. I had said that a cloud bore a cargo of rain. What a change in time! Today, poetry has departed from life, replaced by commerce; cunning has taken the place of grace. These days, the more pronounced a hunchback, the more fascinating it would appear. The more outrageous a poem, the more it will be appreciated.

Then I thought I should be more composed. If I call a cloud a pitcher or a pot, that might be more acceptable. In the year there is plentiful rain, the clouds would be like full pots; in a year of moderate rainfall, the cloud-pots would be half-full; and in a year of drought, the cloud-pots would be empty. I feel nobody would object to this simile. In fact, I suppose it would be much appreciated, but how can I say so myself!

In several places, we could hear the cries of peacocks. At Mangrol, the peacock had come right up to us. We had seen a camel too the day before. It occurred to me that if the camel's legs were removed, it would look much like a peacock—with same gait, the same long neck. Yet one is a symbol of beauty, the other of ugliness. The day of the camel is probably about to come. That day is not far off when the camel rather than the peacock will be the epitome of beauty: it is, after all, hump-backed! The hump will not be considered a disfigurement but a beauty spot!

There is a small city called Bareilly on the Jabalpur-Bhopal Highway, about 20 kilometres from Mangrol, where my close friend Jayantibhai<sup>2</sup> Rathore lives. We decided to go there. The snacks we had brought with us from home were about to run out. Chhotu's shoes were worn out and falling apart. Thakar needed access to a phone so that he could call home. Going to Bareilly would resolve all problems.

The women in Jayantibhai's house prepared an excellent lunch. We enjoyed a good home-cooked meal after many days. They gave us fresh green vegetables. That was not all—when we left, Jayantibhai also came along. He had decided to walk with us for a couple of days. We returned to Mangrol that evening.

<sup>1</sup>Kalidas: A classical Sanskrit writer, poet and dramatist of the 4th or 5th century AD. He is considered to be India's greatest litterateur

<sup>2</sup>bhai: Literally 'brother'; appended to a name as a sign of respect and affection when addressing a close friend or relative

The days were certainly like a furnace but at night it was very pleasant. We slept on the terrace of the temple that night; it was nice and cool. In the morning we saw three pilgrims on the opposite bank. The pilgrims on our side of the river called out to them in greeting: "*Narmade Har!*"

"*Har Narmade!*" chorused the pilgrims from the far side in response.

Wherever possible, the pilgrims on both the banks of the Narmada exchanged greetings in this way. The calm, smooth surface of the water would carry the sound from one side to the other.

We slung our knapsacks on our backs and were off. After about a kilometre, there was a road bridge over the river. It was on a bus route. Thakar intended to return home from there after having walked with us for eight days. He had taken so much time off from his busy professional life just for the sake of joy. He was not an educated unemployed like me. He had left the work of several clients to come on this trip. He had seen beauty in places and things that other people generally miss and in spite of the irksome heat and the blazing sun, he had never been slow to whip out his camera.

When we reached the bridge, Thakar took the way up. We carried on, keeping to the riverside. We had to say goodbye to each other, but we had no words to exchange. Up on the bridge, Thakar waved at us. I waved back and said silently to him, 'Come again on our next walk. We'll be expecting you.'

We spent the mid-day hours at Barahaghat and arrived at Ketudhan in the evening. There was a huge temple, as grand as a mansion, with an impressive *gopuram*<sup>3</sup> at the entrance; a large well; towering trees and gardens full of flowering bushes, but the place itself—right on the Narmada ghat—looked deserted and neglected, like a place in some ancient legend. The temple gate was open, but there was nobody there either. A melancholy beauty pervaded the entire place.

After quite some time, an elderly priest emerged from the inside. Only he and his wife lived there now. The village was far away. The priest, we learned, had been ready to leave the physical world. He told us: "I said to the Mother, 'Take me away from this world.' The Mother replied: 'wait for some time.' That is why I am still here."

<sup>3</sup>*gopuram*: A monumental and ornate tower, graduating from a broad base to a narrower crown, usually found at the entrances of temples particularly in the south of India

There was a very large temple at Kusumkhera too, and an even larger one at here at Ketudhan. Both were about a hundred years old and both were deserted. These large temples must have once been thronged by devotees. The sounds of their gongs and bells must have resounded afar, and there must have been much hustle and bustle during ceremonies and festivals. And now, these temples lay abandoned and neglected, and were falling into ruin. It was disheartening to see all this.

We slept in the open. When I woke up later that night, I looked up at the sky, so full of stars. How grand the sky looked with its dark mantle spangled with billions of stars. What an immensely tall and broad physique the sky has!

'O carefree sky! The stars think that you are their ancestral property. That is why they refuse to budge an inch!

Dear sky! I wish I could steal you away along with the stars. (But when I myself am a part of this infinite sky, how do I steal it?) And, where would I keep you after stealing you? Let me praise you with these words:

*Millions of stars,  
But can stars be counted only in millions?  
Multiply millions with millions  
For thousands of years,  
The result will be the number of stars.  
The sky smiled listening to this  
And said, 'You have just reached  
One or two of the many I have,  
You can never reach my hundreds,  
Forget reaching infinity.  
And after holding so many stars, I am still empty.  
I am so huge  
But,  
If you close your eyes,  
I can come into them  
I am so small too.*

The night throws open the gates of the sky. It shows us that the sky is three-dimensional. During the day, we can only see the length and the

breadth of sky. Its depth can only be understood at night. A small star, due to its closeness, appears to be a gigantic sun. Suns a million times larger seem like tiny stars due to their remoteness. Transforming stars into suns and suns into stars is the magic of the sky's third dimension. It is at night that we realise that the sky is not a flat circular plate, but a rounded pot holding millions and trillions of galaxies. And yet, the pot is empty. If a crow wanted to drink water from this pot, how many galaxies would he have to throw in this pot?

In the morning, the priest invited us very warmly to stay on: "Please stay today, please go tomorrow. A *parikrama* should be done at the pace of an ant. You should stay longer at every place." But we really had to keep going. Jayantibhai had already left to go back home. Chhotu and I continued walking along the riverside. We reached the *ashram* of Mauni Mata before noon. A little temple, a little house, a little tomb—that was the *ashram* of Mauni Mata, the 'Silent Mother'.

When we arrived, Mauni Mata was massaging the abdomen of a very thin and bony old man, who was suffering from a severe pain in the belly. Mauni Mata continued massaging for a long time, pressing down now and then with her fingers. It was a form of acupressure which made the old man cry out in pain, but after a while he felt considerably relieved.

We greeted her respectfully. Mauni Mata invited us—using sign language—to have lunch before we left.

The old man was clearly feeling much better. Joining his hands in gratitude, he said to Mauni Mata:

"For some time now, I have wanted to say something to you, but I hesitate to say it. I'll tell you some other time."

"Don't hesitate, speak out now," Mauni Mata replied in gestures.

The tomb of Mauni Mata's husband was close by, with a small room above it. His wooden sandals and photo had been placed inside the room. Mauni Mata would sit in worship in that room for four hours every day.

"You offer lights and flowers; that is all right," the old man said, "but sitting there for four hours daily in worship is not right. After all, that is an impure place. Your husband's body was cremated there."

Tears began to fall from Mauni Mata's eyes when she heard this. Through gestures she replied: "For me this is the most sacred place. I

couldn't think of sitting anywhere else to do my worship."

As though he had committed a terrible crime against her dead husband, the old man joined his hands again as he said contritely: "O respected Mother, I beg you to forgive me." Mauni Mata lived alone after her husband's death, but his memory was her constant companion.

The old man was a refined gentleman from a well to do family. When Mauni Mata went away he told us: "I am 80 years old. A week ago, I suddenly had high fever and became unconscious. My sons took me to the hospital in a nearby village. They had no hope of saving my life, but by the grace of the Mother I survived. When I fall ill there are two things that can happen: the illness will either go away alone or it will take me with it. I am ready to go; the decision is in the hands of God."

His young son had come with him. "Mauni Mata is originally from Mandla District," he told us. "She is a tribal. About 15 years ago, she came to our village on a *parikrama* with her husband. They stayed at our house, at this spot and after their pilgrimage was over, they came back here again. We built a hut here for them. Gradually, this temple was built. Once, both of them went to Mandla; the husband came back but Mataji stayed there. After two months here, her husband suddenly took ill and died within a day. We went by jeep to Mandla and brought Mataji's family back here to perform the funeral rites. The family returned to Mandla after spending a day here. This place lay abandoned. We thought all the hard work Mauni Mata and her husband had put into the place should not go to waste. If Mauni Mata could live here, this place would be saved from ruin. So we went to Mandla and brought Mauni Mata back. She has been here ever since."

"Have you ever heard her speak?" I asked.

"We tried to break her silence several times. We said that we came in the hope of getting something from her, but due to her silence we returned empty-handed. Then she spoke for a day or two and retreated into silence again. Her voice is so sweet, and she chants the *Ramayana* so melodiously that we just wanted to go on listening to her forever.

"Pilgrims come every day," he went on. "This is what happened two days ago. A group of pilgrims arrived, all from Mandla District. When Mauni Mata glanced at one young woman, she had a shock—it was her own daughter-in-law! Seeing her daughter-in-law in the *parikramavasi* garb,

Mauni Mata's heart was pierced. She took her daughter-in-law into her arms and began to cry. She realised that something was wrong at home. By hugging her daughter-in-law close, she indicated that she shared her suffering."

After a pause, he continued: "What had happened was that Mauni Mata's son had had no children from his first wife, so he took a second wife. This is a tribal custom. But afterwards the first wife had a daughter. Naturally the husband's affection turned again to the first wife. Both of them turned against the second wife—that was the one who came here. They even threw her out of the house. So she had no option but to set out on a *parikrama* with other villagers. The others all went on their way. Mauni Mata made her stay here."

No one knows how many downtrodden find consolation on the banks of Narmada.

Right then, the daughter-in-law came out of the room: a dusky-complexioned, shapely figure swathed in a white sari. "Well, daughter," I asked her, "are you on a *parikrama*?"

"We met before along the way, didn't we?" she said. "Where did the third one go?"

At first, I didn't understand what she was referring to, and then I remembered that we had met a group of seven or eight pilgrims a few days ago. They were all from Mandla District. We had greeted them by saying: "*Narmade Har!*" There had been a few women in the group and she had been one of them. By 'the third one' she meant Thakar, who had gone back home only the day before.

A deep sadness overcame me when I saw her. How could fortune play such a cruel trick on her? She had hardly started her life as a housewife when she had been forced into a life of renunciation. Mauni Mata's heart must have been filled with so much grief, knowing that her own son was the cause of her daughter-in-law's misfortune.

Then somebody said: "Have your bath, all of you, and come. Lunch is ready."

We bathed and came back. Meanwhile another *parikramavasi* had arrived. He was a young Bengali *sadhu* of the Ramanandi<sup>4</sup> Order. The

<sup>4</sup>*Ramanandi*: A follower of Ramananda, a Vaishnava saint in medieval India. Ramanandis worship mainly Ram and Vishnu and constitute one of the largest and most egalitarian Hindu sects of India

three of us ate lunch together. Mauni Mata was on a fast, taking only jag-gery and water, but she served food to the pilgrims very lovingly.

We rested there until late afternoon, and then left to continue our journey along the riverside. We had not gone far when a voice called out from behind us: "Saaaa-tta Ram!"



### 13. Mauni Mata's Ashram to Karaundi

We turned around, looking behind us. We saw the young Ramanandi Bengali *sadhu*, who had had lunch with us at Mauni Mata's Ashram, hurrying towards us. When he caught up with us, he said: "First I thought I would leave when it becomes less hot, then I thought I should walk with you."

We walked ahead together. Some distance further, on the bank of the Narmada near a village called Rakh, was the cottage of a *sanyasini*<sup>1</sup>. We had heard that she tended to be forthright and sharp-tongued. When we arrived, we saw her car parked outside her house. A canopy for a *yagya*<sup>2</sup> and a pit for the sacred fire were being prepared in the large inner courtyard. We went in and sat down by the *sanyasini*. We conversed a little, and then tea was served. "If there is any left, give them some," she said to her servant.

However, as I did not drink tea, I declined to have any. The *sadhu* however drained his tea in one gulp, wiped his lips, and stood up to leave. Clouds had started gathering in the sky and it looked like it would rain

<sup>1</sup>*sanyasini*: A female Hindu religious mendicant; an ascetic

<sup>2</sup>*yagya*: A ritual sacrifice, performed as a Hindu religious practice, usually for a specific objective

at any moment but he was determined to go, so we went along with him. We had just reached the village when it began to drizzle, so we took shelter there until the rain stopped before moving on.

"Did you hear what she said?" the *sadhu* said indignantly. "If there is any tea left, give it to them.' Is that the way a *sanyasin* should speak? It was so wrong! That is why I hurried away. I don't like to stay where there is no love."

The *sadhu* was very tough: he was undertaking the entire *parikrama* alone. He had even been through the bandit-infested Shulpan Jhari on his own. He walked under the strong sun with his torso bare and wore a bracelet of basil (*tulsi*) wood on each arm.

"Ramanandis wear basil wood beads while Shaivites<sup>3</sup> wear *rudraksh* seeds," he explained. He carried a large pair of tongs. First he would plant the tongs into the ground, and only then would he sit down. "I live at Govardhan-Vrindavan<sup>4</sup>," he informed us. He greeted everyone he met with "Saaaa-tta Ram! Narmade Har!"

We came to Boras in the evening. It was a large village with an equally large temple and an adjoining Sanskrit school, where we stayed the night. We were about to leave the next morning when the chief priest of the temple stopped the *sadhu*. This was a Ram temple and the *sadhu* was, after all, a Ramanandi—a worshipper of Ram.

It was the night of no moon, *Amavasya*, and there were festive throngs on both banks of the Narmada. Our way lay along the riverside. Groups of people could be seen everywhere, several taking their holy dip. The atmosphere along the riverside was lively. The Narmada's current swung from bank to bank; she kept changing sides.

We spent the mid-day hours at Andiya. There was a large crowd of villagers under the trees on the hilltop. I thought it must be an *Amavasya* gathering. A villager told us it was Sunday, a sacred day in this particular village. Every Sunday there would be a crowd such as this.

We reached Kelkach in the evening. "All pilgrims stay at the home of two brothers in this village," said a farmer. "You too should go there." He sent a boy to show us the way. When we arrived at the house, we first

<sup>3</sup>Shaivites: Devotees who worship Shiva

<sup>4</sup>Govardhan-Vrindavan: Govardhan is a sacred hill in the town of Vrindavan in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. It is believed to be the natural form of Lord Krishna

came across several fine acacia trees, then we crossed an elevated yard, then another even more elevated yard, and finally we reached the house.

Everything was neat and clean and well-maintained. The elegance and simplicity of the place was very pleasing to see. Yet there was nobody at home. It was astonishing that a house with such large rooms should have a doorway but no door. It was the first time that we saw a house with a door-less front entrance! I peeped inside. All the usual household items were there, including cooking pots and utensils. Everything was in good order, but the house was empty of its occupants.

We had not even met the brothers yet, but I addressed them silently: 'You do not make any distinction between your house and the outside world. Both of you are real *sadhus*. Only people with great souls could live in such a manner.'

A little later both the brothers came home. We apologised for disturbing them. The elder brother must have been about 40 years old; the younger about 35. Neither was married. The elder brother was dressed in the robes of a *sadhu*.

"I am not interested in worldly things," he told me. "I would like to leave home and renounce the world, but my younger brother is so innocent that he would not be able to manage on his own. So I simply can't leave him and go away."

In the evening, Chhotu and the younger brother cooked dinner and all four of us ate together. We slept out in the open that night.

Well before dawn, hundreds of crows began cawing in the acacia trees that stood in front of the house. The call of the *koel*<sup>5</sup> came from afar. I lay in bed wondering whether birds of different species could understand each other's language. Could the crow understand the *koel*? No! This would not be possible for birds. Only humans have the ability to communicate with each other through the gift of speech. Only humans have developed language, and every human language has a unique feature: it can be translated.

The languages of animals and birds cannot be translated. Neighing of horses cannot be translated into barking, nor cawing into cuckooing. This is because their sounds are merely sounds. While sound is natural, language is cultural. Natural sound is instinctive; language must be learnt.

<sup>5</sup>*koel*: The Indian cuckoo

Humans cannot know any language without learning it. Even one's mother tongue must be learnt; one can learn other languages as well.

Well, let's get back to the crows. "You are cawing so much—show a bit of sense in your cawing," I admonished them. "I challenge you to convert your cawing into a dialect. You have stayed in the community of noise for a long time; now evolve into the community of meaning!" Then, I added affectionately, "You, and only you among all the birds, can do this. We have read a lot about the cleverness and the cunning of your ancestors. You are the descendents of those distinguished forebears. Can you not develop that tradition further? Why don't you stop merely caw-cawing and develop an alphabet? In the bird kingdom, only you can achieve this—even parrots cannot do it. Parrots can only repeat what they hear. They are not as clever as you!"

Just then, all the crows suddenly flew away and my lecture (rather, my exhortation) came to an abrupt end. (Otherwise, I would have elaborated on the subject of vowels and consonants. The crows appeared to be more interested in consonants than vowels. Perhaps they had flown off in quest of them.) Had they not gone I would have also told them about prose and poetry: how God created prose first, and then from its ribs created poetry. But before I could prove my basis for that theory, the crows had flown away. I was concerned about just one thing: what if these crows turned out to be weak descendants of strong ancestors? Would they be a blot on their ancestors' achievements?

Just then, a crow appeared from nowhere and whispered in my ear: "We love listening to our own cawing more than listening to you cawing." Birds cannot form words, nor develop a language, nor can their sounds be interpreted or translated.

I had thought that they would have been proud to receive such an important responsibility—that of developing their meaningless sounds into an intelligible language—and would thank me for the suggestion, but here was a different story. This crow had turned the tables on me. My heart sank. But still, I had to add just few more words: "Dear Crow, do you know which sect and dynasty you belong to?" I then tried heaping praise on it, and even criticising it by turn, but nothing I said seemed to have any impact on it at all. I was quite disheartened. We packed up our luggage and left.

We reached Pataighat by mid-day and were just climbing up the steps to the temple when a familiar voice boomed: "Seeee-tta Ram! Narmade Har! You've arrived!" The Ramanandi *sadhu* had got there ahead of us. We were together once again.

The temple grounds at Pataighat were very large, with huge trees. *Chabutras* had been built under the trees and the place had a garden-like environment. Pilgrims could avail of cooked meals in the *ashram* dining hall. *Sadavrat* was available to anyone who otherwise preferred to cook their own meals. The *sadavrat* was stored in the verandah. There was a notice there: 'Mother Narmada's Pantry: Help Yourself to *Sadavrat*'.

An elderly *parikramavasi* was staying in the next room. He told us, "I am on a Markandeya<sup>6</sup> *parikrama*. It takes 12 years. I have completed 11 years. I have neither left out a single village nor a *ghat*. I don't cross the tributary rivers: I walk all around them as well." He stopped for a while, and then added: "At the time of Rishi Markandeya, the course of the Narmada stretched all the way from the foot of the Vindhyas<sup>7</sup> to the foot of the Satpur<sup>8</sup>." Talking about himself, he said, the stomach is very demanding, "but so far I have never begged for food."

The *parikramavasi*'s fingers had been deformed by leprosy. He had some difficulty in speaking as well, but whatever he had to say was very interesting. I was enjoying listening to him when our Ramanandi *sadhu* intervened and picked a quarrel with him.

"In which book is it written that the Markandeya *parikrama* takes 12 years? Tell me, which book?" the *sadhu* demanded to know. "You are making it all up!"

They began to argue. In the end, the old man went away. I was disgusted with the behaviour of the *sadhu*.

<sup>6</sup>Markandeya: The descriptor derived from the name of Markandey, an ancient and much revered sage. He was a devotee of both the godly manifestations, Shiva and Vishnu

<sup>7</sup>Vindhyas: A hilly range in central India that runs westwards from near the Ganges river in the north-east, close to the borders of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan up to the east of the Gujarat peninsula. It effectively divides, along with the parallel Satpura range, the Indian sub-continent into the north and the south

<sup>8</sup>Satpur<sup>8</sup>: A range of hills in central India running roughly parallel to the Vindhyas, from the state of Chhattisgarh, along the borders of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh to the east of the state of Gujarat. The Narmada runs from the east in the depression between the two ranges, finally flowing into the Arabian Sea in the west

The *Akshay Trutiya*<sup>9</sup> festival was to be celebrated in a couple of days. There would be a mass wedding ceremony at Pataighat on that auspicious day, with all expenses borne by the *ashram*. There was no caste discrimination in these marriages. The brides with their families had already arrived and there was a lot of hustle and bustle. The grooms had not yet reached the venue. They were due to arrive with their wedding retinues the following day.

As the day turned into dusk, little decorated wooden posts were pitched at several spots in the spacious compound. There sat the happy maidens, with dreams of their future about to come true. How charming those dusky young girls looked in their simple ornaments. The women of their families began the ritual purification ceremony, applying the golden turmeric paste to the shapely arms and backs of the brides while singing auspicious songs. What a pure, holy scene it was.

I was lost in a dream-world.

In my mind's eye I saw a 26<sup>th</sup> bride. Like these village girls, she too was clad in a simple sari while her friends applied turmeric paste to her beautiful shapely arms. I watched unblinkingly, utterly fascinated. "Don't stare!" she warned, and bursts out laughing.

I said to the chief priest of the temple, "This 26<sup>th</sup> bride is called Kanta. It has been 42 years since our wedding, but I would like to marry her again, here on the banks of Mother Narmada, along with all these couples. Once we get married because of our parents wishes. Now we want to repeat on our own accord. Please perform our wedding as well."

(Just then, Kanta told me, "What if I refuse to marry you again?" I replied, "Then I will end my life here. If possible, make an offering of two flowers on my grave." Far from being upset when she heard this, she said laughingly: "No need for such a sacrifice, noble husband!" Then she told the priest: "The Lord has created me for him. Please perform our marriage too.")

And after the wedding ceremony, the two of us, Kanta and I, would go to the *ghat*, down the flight of steps to the water's edge, and sprinkle

<sup>9</sup>*Akshay Trutiya*: One of the four most holy days observed by devout Hindus, *Akshay Tirthya* falls on the third lunar day of the bright half (*Shukla Paksha*—see Glossary) of the Hindu month of *Vaishakha* which straddles the months of April and May. It celebrates the birth of Lord Parshurama who is believed to be the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is believed that it was on this day that the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, began to be written by Ved Vyas and Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed god

the holy water of the Narmada on our foreheads. As we did so, we would say: "Give us your blessings, Mother."

(My own mother and father would not be here to see our happiness on this day of our renewed vows. Kanta's father too is no more. Her mother is still living. Now she is mother to both of us).

Every married couple should have the right to a second instalment of marriage after 40 years together. It would be a renewal of the wedding vows of 40 years ago: it would be a marital resurrection.

In the morning, we moved on. The Ramanandi *sadhu* was still with us. As we left, an idea occurred to me: 'How wonderful would it be if the name of this beautiful place were Patanjali Ghat instead of Pataighat, commemorating the famous author of the ancient yoga texts.' This may well have been its name in the past.

The path took us along the riverside. We walked with a villager who was knowledgeable about medicinal herbs. He recounted a strange incident: "This happened several years ago. A farmer from our village went off in the small hours of the morning to go to the city. It was summer, and still dark when he broke off a twig from a tree and walked along, brushing his teeth with it. He came to a stream further on when it was just beginning to get light. While he was rinsing his mouth, all his teeth fell out, in ones and twos! There was a search for that tree but it was never found."

Hirapur was ahead. A big *yagya* was underway and a huge crowd had gathered. A large number of people had come from the nearby villages either by tractor-trailers, jeeps or bullock-carts, or on foot, or by boat from the opposite bank. We bathed there, and then continued our journey.

There was a road that led us onward from Hirapur. It drizzled a bit on the way but that was not a problem. We reached Karaundi in the evening. There was a small temple in the village, a big *chabutra* under a thick-trunked *siddha bakul*<sup>10</sup> tree (our Ramanandi *sadhu* identified it for

<sup>10</sup>*siddha bakul*: A tree with a dense leafy canopy. It has great religious significance and is often found in Hindu temple grounds. The *siddha* (literally, 'that which has attained perfection') *bakul* is said to have sprung up after the planting of a toothpick used by Lord Jagannath (a deity believed to be an incarnation of the god Vishnu). The tree was planted to provide shade to Srila Haridas Thakur, one of the most famous converts to Hinduism from Islam by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a social reformer of the early 16th century in eastern India. Sri Chaitanya had enjoined Srila Haridas Thakur to chant the *Hare Krishna maha-mantra*, a constant and repetitive chant of the name of the Hindu god Krishna, which amounted to 300,000 chants a day, under the *siddha bakul* tree. The *siddha bakulis* also considered to be a wish-fulfilling tree



us) and a hand-pump for water close by. We camped on this *chabutra* for the night. The Narmada was far from this village. In the evening I went alone to the riverbank and came across a cottage built on a high cliff. The rippling Narmada could be seen for a long distance from this spot. It seemed like a specially-made spectators' point.

There was a young banyan tree in the clean courtyard of the cottage. Three of its aerial roots had penetrated into the earth and another was almost there. Had one more aerial root entered the ground, this banyan would have been in the *panchayatana*<sup>11</sup> style. There was a fine earthen *chabutra* all around the banyan tree. When I arrived, the old lady who lived in the cottage with her husband was plastering it with fresh mud. This cottage was in an extremely quiet setting.

"Is it your cottage?" I asked the old gentleman.

"The cottage belongs to the Narmada; we merely live in it," he replied.

"It is very beautiful. We are staying at the temple but we should have stayed here," I said.

"Well, never mind, bring your luggage and come and stay here."

"It's rather late now, but we'll come early in the morning. We'll stay here tomorrow too."

"Be sure to come," said the old man. "I am counting on you."

I went back to the temple and slept on the platform of the *chabutra*. There was a wedding at a house in the village. A loudspeaker kept blaring late into the night.

In the morning we went to the cottage. The glorious beauty of the morning lay over the Narmada. Had we come earlier, we could have seen the lovely sunrise.

"You live here day and night, *Baba*. Tell us something about the river," I asked the old man.

"At night the river goes to sleep," he began. "Sometimes we can even hear her snoring. When the river is in spate during the monsoon, the foaming water flows at great speed and in its agitation tries to flow over the banks. It is quite frightening to watch the thundering, roaring, restless river but a great joy too. We are quite isolated here. Still, we wouldn't ever think of leaving."

<sup>11</sup>*panchayatana*: A group of five temples, a big one in the centre and four small temples at the four corners.

The old man had a poetic heart. He clearly loved the river, the earth, and all of nature deeply. Perhaps he also loved solitude.

Water had to be fetched from the Narmada. Chhotu came back quickly bringing the water. When I expressed surprise, the old man said, "It's a steep climb for us old ones, but nothing to the young. For them, an elephant is an ant."

The old man was a Gond tribal. There were quite a few Gond families in that village. The wedding that was taking place was of a Gond family too. We were invited to attend it along with the old man.

"Now customs have changed. In the past, the girls in our Gond community used to go with their wedding processions to the homes of the boys. The girl's father would give away the bride; it was he who had to give her away. It was the magnanimity of the giver (the girl's father) that he would go himself to present the gift; nobody needed to go to his house and ask for the bride. That is why he would take his daughter, accompanied by her wedding procession, to the boy's home. That was the *brahmashri*<sup>12</sup> form of marriage, the noblest form. When the boy and his wedding procession go to the girl's home, that is a *rajarshri*<sup>13</sup> marriage, the kingly form, which has now become the accepted custom."

Then he said, "The Gond king of Madanpur<sup>14</sup> used to have a country house here. The *raja*<sup>15</sup> was my maternal uncle. The kingdom vanished, the house collapsed and this cottage took its place. The king's family wanted me to live here and take care of the cottage right from the start, but my mother was old at the time and I told them I couldn't leave her. If one abandons the gods of home, one cannot worship another god. My mother passed away two years ago at the age of 90. We came here afterwards. Now our son, daughter-in-law and grandson are all at home and they are very good, but I am no longer interested in worldly attachments. Here on the bank of the Narmada is the joy of heaven."

<sup>12</sup>*brahmashri*: A member of the highest order of *rishis* or sages, who has grasped the ultimate in divine knowledge. *Brahmarshis* are credited with the composition of the hymns of the Rig Veda, an ancient text containing a sacred collection of verses in praise of Hindu deities

<sup>13</sup>*rajarshri*: A king who has become a *rishi* (sage) in his understanding of divine knowledge. A *rajarshri* does not abdicate his kingship and continues to fulfil his royal duties

<sup>14</sup>*Madanpur*: A census town in the eastern state of West Bengal

<sup>15</sup>*raja*: An Indian king

It had suddenly become cold in the evening. There had been a light rain during the past two days. Hailstones had fallen nearby. I put on a sweater at bedtime and we slept inside the cottage instead of out in the open. Even so, I woke up from the cold in the early hours. Such cold at this time of year! The cold had infiltrated the hot season.

I remembered a rhyme I had heard from my mother as a child:

*"Come out quickly, Bring sunshine, Father Sun,  
Your children are shivering, every one!"*

'O Sun,' 'you rise early in summer. Couldn't you have risen a bit earlier today? Your children are shivering with the cold.'

In the morning I would find out whether the sun had taken any notice of my application. Let me tell you what happened to it. It went the way of most applications—it was thrown into the dustbin. The sun did come out early, but only a second or two, according to his fixed schedule.



## 14. Karaundi to Barman Ghat

"S eeeee-tta Ram! Narmade Har! Professor Sahib<sup>1</sup>, I'm off!"

We had woken up early in the morning but the Ramanandi *sadhu* had already come back after bathing in pitch darkness. "I want to reach Barman Ghat by the evening. You take your time; I'm off," he said.

Barman Ghat was 30 kilometres away. We intended to get there in three days' time. "Instead of three days, we'll get there in two. Let's go together. You'll reach only one day later," I offered.

"I want to get there today at all costs," the *sadhu* insisted. "S eeeee-tta Ram! Narmade Har!"

He picked up his shoulder bag and water vessel and swiftly went off down the hill. We did not take our eyes off him until he was out of sight.

This wiry but strong young *sadhu* had been walking between 30 to 35 kilometres a day. He had walked the whole *parikrama* alone, even through Shulpan Jhari. So why should he stay on with us? We were lucky to have had four days together.

As he was from Bengal, he spoke Hindi with a Bengali accent, and he would say "*baba*" after every few words. He called me "Professor Sahib."

<sup>1</sup>*Sahib*: A respectful form of address which means 'master'

He talked a lot, but he simply did not have the patience to listen to others. Whenever anyone else would begin to speak, he would interrupt immediately. He was always alert, to the point of aggressiveness. If some *parikramavasi* happened to talk about something interesting which we would be engrossed in listening to with enjoyment, the Bengali *sadhu* would become argumentative, imposing his own trite opinion on us and effectively ruining the conversation.

Of course his store of information was amazing. There seemed to be no subject on which he could not talk at length; he had an answer to every question. All sorts of information buzzed like bees in his brain, as if longing to emerge from their hive. Sometimes he appeared to be not merely well-informed but almost omniscient, yet in the four days we were together he never said anything particularly striking, unusual or memorable. He had an insatiable urge to give his opinion, and talked incessantly, as if he were under a curse.

He was harsh and arrogant but also fearless and audacious. He simply did not entertain fear. He was worth listening to only in the evenings when he read Sanskrit verses aloud. His voice was incredibly melodious. Despite his shortcomings, I was sad when he left. Out of thousands of his remarks, none was particularly memorable, but I will never forget his fearlessness.

We too set off.

Bilthari was ahead of us. In the evening, we came to a *mauni baba's* hut near the village of Chattarpur. Half a dozen *sadhus* were seated inside the hut. One had lived there for five years, while the *mauni baba* had been there for four years. The others had come only in the last week. Except for the *sadhu* who had been there for five years, all the others were about to set out on their *parikrama* in a day or two. The *mauni baba* was the youngest. When I looked at his face I was startled. What a finely chiseled face! I could not take my eyes off him. I felt as if I had seen him before somewhere. His was a known and recognisable face. Where had I seen it before? I struggled to remember.

Yes! It suddenly occurred to me: it was a face from a painting by my *guru* Nandlal Bose<sup>2</sup>. In it, the five Pandava brothers were going out with

<sup>2</sup>Nandlal Bose: Also known as Nandlal Basu (1882-1966). An artist from the Bengal school of art, he was known for his 'Indian' style of painting which he infused with idealism and integrity. He was the principal of Kala Bhavan in Shantiniketan in 1922 and credited as one of the leading artists responsible for the renaissance of art in India

their mother Kunti, after having set fire to the house. This was the face of Arjun<sup>3</sup>: the same finely-chiselled nose, high forehead, huge expressive eyes and the same manly beauty.

However, when Nandlal painted that picture, this *sadhu* had not yet been born. Perhaps the Creator used the image of Arjun in the painting as a model while creating him!

After a little while, a black cat came in and sat on the lap of one of the *sadhus*. He stroked the cat very lovingly and told us that a few days ago a dog had pounced on it, and it had escaped and climbed a tree in panic. The *sadhu* had rescued it. Since then, the cat had accompanied him. Two days ago he had rescued a bird from this cat. "Stupid wretch!" he had scolded the cat crossly. "Three days ago your life was saved and today you tried to take the life of this innocent bird!" Cats catch mice easily but they can also catch birds at times. Sometimes two cats pounce on the same mouse hidden in the grass at the same instant and end up banging their heads against each other.

Another *sadhu* recounted an anecdote: "My *guru* had a cat of which he was very fond. He called it 'Langadu'. It used to sit in his lap and purr contentedly. The cat would get the cream, while all we got was buttermilk. If any of the disciples ate the cream, our *guru* would scold him severely, saying, 'What! Did you become a *sadhu* for the sake of eating?' Once he went to Jagannath Puri<sup>4</sup>. Left behind, the cat stopped eating. We gave it lots of cream but it wouldn't even look at it. The *guru* came back after 18 days. As soon as he arrived, he called out: 'Langadu!' After 18 days of fasting, the cat had become terribly weak. It could hardly walk. It could hardly manage a 'meow'. Our *guru* was filled with compassion; tears came into his eyes. He held it to his chest. He fed 'Langadu' milk with his own hands. What a fuss he made of it! In a few days the cat was back to normal."

One of the *sadhus* said to me, "Baba, spend the *Chaturmas* retreat here."

"If only I could!" I replied. "We have to be on our way tomorrow morning."

<sup>3</sup>Arjun: The third of the Pandava brothers and the only undefeated hero of the Mahabharata. It was Arjun to whom Lord Krishna addressed his philosophical and theological discourse, recorded in the Bhagwad Gita (see Glossary)

<sup>4</sup>Jagannath Puri: The town of Puri in the Indian state of Orissa (now Odisha) where the famous 11th century temple of Lord Jagannath, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, is situated. Puri is often referred to as 'Jagannath Puri' by devotees of Lord Jagannath

"Then come and look at the rocks in the river," urged the *sadhu*. "It looks as if a big *shivling* has been placed in the river. The name of this *ghat* is Lingaghat."

The light blue or slate grey rocks were indeed unusual. The effect of water had made them very attractive, giving them interesting texture. I looked at them until it was dark, and then went back to the hut. There was to be a night-long *Ramayana* reading. Tea and *chillums*<sup>5</sup> were circulated. "Tea and *chillums* go well together," we were told.

We left a little late the next morning. The sun was strong and we walked in silence. There was nothing but the sun in the sky. It seemed to me that the daytime sky remained desert with only the sun in it. The night sky is a Valley of Flowers! Behold the moon, waxing or waning, the twinkling stars, the glittering planets, and the Milky Way—the spine of the sky! The night sky is the owner of extensive treasure, which can be contemplated for hours. What is there to see in the bare, charmless sky of day?

The entire beauty of the daytime sky centred on the sun. The splendour of the night sky is spread over the entire sky. But both are necessary, like a father and a mother. We need both—centralisation as well as decentralisation, provided they are in proper place!

We reached Ramghat by noon. The temple and *dharmshala* were on a cliff. Barman Ghat could be seen in the distance. A village called Chanvarpatha, from which villagers came to Ramghat to bathe, was one and a half kilometres away. "Do stay here for a night," said one of the villagers. "It is very peaceful here. A *sadhu* came here a few days ago. He has a very gentle manner and you will enjoy meeting him."

We climbed up the cliff path. The *sadhu* wore a white dhoti—a length of white cloth draped over his lower body. He did not wear stitched garments. He had a light complexion and a face like the sages of old, with a white beard and spectacles. He was reading the *Yog Vasistha*<sup>6</sup> when we arrived. He welcomed us warmly and insisted on our staying.

<sup>5</sup>*chillums*: A conical pipe, originally made of clay and dating back to the 18th century, traditionally smoked by wandering *sadhus*

<sup>6</sup>*Yog Vasistha*: An ancient Sanskrit text, written by the sage Valmiki and believed to answer all the questions that arise in the human mind. It is a telling of the discourse between the sage Vasistha and Lord Ram, when the latter was in a state of despair and disillusionment after touring his father's kingdom. Containing profound spiritual truths, the reading of the *Yog Vasistha* is said to lead to *moksha*, the ultimate release from the cycle of birth and death. It is the longest ancient Sanskrit text after the *Mahabharata*. The oldest available manuscript dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD

"I am also on a *parikrama*," he said. "I started out from Chaubis Avtar and came here four days ago. This place seemed so peaceful, pure and holy that I had no wish to leave. The villagers too are keen for me to spend the *Chaturmas* retreat here."

The *dharmshala* there was good, but in poor condition. One part had collapsed. There were two large rooms and two verandahs. The *sadhu* was seated in one of the verandahs. There was a high wooden bed there too, but he was sitting on the floor with a few items for the ritual of worship. There were some sacred books before him. His name was Haridas, and he was a very modest and cultured ascetic.

"Have you had lunch?" I asked him.

"My meals come from the house of a gentleman in Chanvarapatha, but it didn't come today," he said.

"Never mind!" I said. "Please have lunch with us."

The *sadhu* told me more about himself. "My wife took *diksha* from Mother Anandamayi<sup>7</sup>. Later I too was initiated. I had a good job in Mumbai and retired two years ago. It is a year and a quarter since I left home and I have been on a *parikrama* for four months."

"What about your family?"

"I have a wife and three daughters."

"Didn't they stop you from leaving home?"

"No, they were quite willing to let me go. My eldest daughter is 24. She has also taken *diksha*. She has taken a vow of celibacy. She works as an interior decorator and earns a good salary. She sings melodiously too. She has offered to take complete responsibility for her younger sisters. 'Please go without a care,' she told me. My younger daughters are good students and have won scholarships."

"You will only be able to meet your family again after the *parikrama* is over," I remarked.

"I am staying here for *Chaturmas* so they can come here to see me."

<sup>7</sup>Mother Anandamayi: Born in poverty as Nirmala Sundari in West Bengal, Mother Anandamayi (1896-1982) or 'Anandamayi Ma' as she was popularly known was so named as she seemed to be in a perpetual state of joy (*anand*) even in difficult times. She self-initiated into spirituality at the age of 26 on a full moon night, and had a celibate marriage. Her demeanour of constant joy, bliss and ecstasy and her periods of deep meditation which led to spiritual revelations made her into a contemporary saint with many followers drawn to her as the living embodiment of a divine spirit

Having left his happy family, here he was, living alone in this uninhabited and isolated place. There was nobody else there at night. Had he not been there, we might not have stayed, or at the most we would have spent one night there and gone onwards to Barman. As it happened, we stayed on longer because he was there. I liked his quiet manner.

There was a large *peepal* tree on the cliff-top opposite the *dharmshala*. All day flocks of *pakshilakhkujitum*<sup>8</sup> stayed in it, recalling to my mind Shankaracharya's famous Sanskrit anthem to the Narmada<sup>9</sup>. I watched all varieties of birds chirping, hopping about and flying, and gave the tree a Sanskrit name: '*Pakshitirtham*'<sup>10</sup>. There was a jar of drinking water in one corner of the *dharmshala*. I gave the corner a Sanskrit name too: '*Kumbhakonam*'<sup>11</sup>.

The next day we went to Barman Ghat and returned a bit late for lunchtime. "I went to Chanvarapatha today," said Haridasji. "I had my lunch there and brought some for you too."

"Why didn't your lunch come yesterday?"

"The daughter of the house where my meals come from had got married and had left to live in a nearby city. Her father gave as much as he could by way of dowry. The family she married into was greedy for more, not being satisfied with what they got. Two days ago they set fire to their daughter-in-law. Yesterday she died in hospital. That's why nobody could come."

There used to be a custom of *sati*<sup>12</sup> in our country. After the death of her husband, the wife was expected to join him on his funeral pyre where

<sup>8</sup>*pakshilakhkujitum*: Literally, 'a hundred thousand birds warbling'

<sup>9</sup>Shankaracharya's famous anthem to the Narmada: The reference is to Adi Shankaracharya's composition *Narmada Ashtakam*. '*Ashtakam*' means eight sections. The same music is repeated for each section

<sup>10</sup>*Pakshitirtham*: A *tirtham* is a holy lake or pond; here, it is used in the sense of 'a place of pilgrimage for birds' (*pakshi*)

<sup>11</sup>*Kumbhakonam*: Literally, 'pitcher's corner'. The allusion is to the *kumbh* or mythical clay pitcher of the Hindu god Brahma, in which he had placed the seeds of all living beings on earth. The pitcher was said to have been displaced by the dissolution of the universe, and came to rest in the spot where the town now called '*Kumbhakonam*' is situated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu

<sup>12</sup>*sati*: A Hindu funeral practice in which a newly-widowed woman immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. *Sati* (Sanskrit) is the feminine form of *sat*, or true, and was a test of true devotion to the dead husband. The practice of *sati* has been banned by law in India

she would be burnt alive along with his corpse. Now, in modern times, this 'rite' is performed in the kitchen. That was 'outdoor *sati*'; today it is 'indoor *sati*', which is even worse. In this 'custom', it is only the wife who is burnt to death.

Haridasji spoke beautiful Hindi, yet a Gujarati word would creep in here and there. I realised on the first day that he was originally from Gujarat. The second day we conversed only in Gujarati.

It was now the third day since we had arrived at Ramghat and it was the day of the festival of *Ganga Saptami*<sup>13</sup>, when Ganga, the sacred river, is said to come for a holy dip in the Narmada. There would be large crowds of people coming to bathe at Barman Ghat. We also planned to bathe there and conclude this stretch of the walk. We would go home in the evening.

We went to Barman Ghat in the morning. The waterfront is very extensive here. There are three notable *ghats* on Narmada in Madhya Pradesh: Maheswar, Hoshangabad and Barman. Maheswar Ghat can be likened to classical music, Hoshangabad Ghat to light music and Barman Ghat to folk music. The atmosphere of this *ghat* at Barman had all the vigour and unpretentiousness of folk music.

There were large crowds of bathers on both banks of the Narmada. Boats ferried people from one side to the other. There was a noisy hustle and bustle, gatherings with *sadhus*, and a variety of voices of devotees singing hymns and chanting *kirtans*<sup>14</sup>. All this activity enhanced the beauty of the waterfront. A singer sat on the bottom step, right beside the water, accompanying himself on the single-stringed *iktara*<sup>15</sup>. His prayer arose from a simple, truthful heart:

"Great goddess Narmada, we bow to touch your feet

We have come singing and playing to honour you . . ."

Charmed, I listened to the music. It exactly expressed my own sentiments: 'We will always be busy with our work. But O Mother Narmada!

<sup>13</sup>*Ganga Saptami*: This marks the day that the holy river Ganga descended to earth. It is observed on the seventh day of the bright phase of the moon (*Shukla Paksha*) in the Hindu month of *Vaisakhi*, which corresponds to late April and early May

<sup>14</sup>*kirtans*: Sanskrit hymns of praise performed ritually by devotees in call-and-response chants, usually accompanied by Indian musical instruments such as the harmonium, the *tabla* and *mridanga* (percussion instruments), and small brass cymbals

<sup>15</sup>*iktara*: A single-stringed Indian musical instrument

Today we have come to you to receive joy and your blessings!"

The crowd was thickening and with it the sounds of happy voices surged louder. The day before, there had been only one or two beggars. Today, I was astonished to see a long row of them and wondered where they had all suddenly sprung from.

We went back to Ramghat at mid-day. A *sadhu* with matted hair had arrived in the meanwhile. He had removed Haridas' belongings from the wooden bed and arrogantly taken over the place for himself. He had also ordered a villager to bring lunch for him. His red garments and the various religious symbols painted on his body displayed power.

Haridas knew him; they had walked together on the pilgrimage for a few days. The newcomer laid down the law during the conversation, saying: "It is written in the religious books that austerities should be performed only at Uttarakhand, at the Himalayan upper reaches of Ganga, or at Revakhand in the Narmada valley. There are no other places."

We took leave of Haridas in the late afternoon. As we left, I wondered how he was going to manage in that isolated place. Enfolded in the deep darkness of night, the river would slumber, the birds would be silent, the hut on the hilltop would be enveloped in an awful stillness and every moment would seem endless. How could Haridas stay alone? Would he not feel lonely, would he not feel afraid? But who could feel afraid if his heart had become identified with solitude!

We were soon back at Barman Ghat and would take a bus home from there. Standing on the waterfront, I watched the evening sun settle into the lap of the river, the boats bringing visitors across and the boatmen handling the boats. An incident suddenly came to mind:

It happened one day in the year 1933. In those days there was no bridge on the river. There was a boat standing at this very *ghat*. Mahatma Gandhi<sup>16</sup> had wanted to go by that boat to the other side, but the boatmen would not allow him to simply step into the boat. "We cannot allow you into the boat," they said, "until we have reverently washed your feet." Gandhiji was not willing to be so honoured. The boatmen insisted on washing his feet before he entered the boat. There was an impasse.

<sup>16</sup>Mahatma Gandhi: Born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), he was called Mahatma (literally, 'great soul') Gandhi. He propagated non-violence and led the civil disobedience movement that won independence for India from British colonial rule. He is also called the 'Father of the Nation'

Finally, Gandhiji's companions urged him to comply with the heartfelt request of the simple, devout boatmen. Gandhiji had no choice but to reluctantly allow his feet to be washed. One of his companions later wrote: "As I watched this, I was intensely reminded of the story in the *Ramayana* of the boatman washing the feet of Lord Ram before ferrying him across the Ganga."

How did these illiterate, rustic boatmen know that this skinny little man was no ordinary passenger but a divine person worthy of such high respect? How could they understand the importance of this man?

According to a story in the *Mahabharat*, Lord Surya, the sun god, told his son Karna one night: "Whoever comes to your door as a beggar tomorrow morning will be Indra<sup>17</sup> himself." Maybe the god Varun<sup>18</sup> had previously told these Kevats—these sons of Varun: "The man who comes tomorrow to cross the river by your boat will be no ordinary traveller but a great soul. Wait for his arrival and make no mistake."

It was time to leave.

When we started this walk, there had been not a single leaf on the *peepal* trees. Then gradually, pink buds began to appear and now the trees were covered in a dense mass of young, pink leaves. Spring had visited the *peepal* at last, and she would surely reach the teak trees by the time the monsoon arrived.

This time, the walk was unusually easy: no mountains, no forests and no ravines. There had been no waterfalls either; only level plains. The path had been mainly along the riverside; there was no question of losing one's way. This journey had been a 'Peace March'.

I had enjoyed the blessings of nature for 18 days, slept under the sky, been admitted into the royal reception hall of the stars, woken up with the birds, scorched in the sun, bathed in the river, stayed overnight in unknown villages and listened to the sound of silence. I had found all this happiness by simply walking along, holding onto Mother Narmada's finger.

*"I was a pilgrim for 18 days.  
Coming home, I became a city dweller."*

<sup>17</sup>Indra: The Hindu 'Lord of the gods', also the god of thunder and lightning, and war

<sup>18</sup>Varun: The Hindu god of the sky, rain, water and the celestial oceans

When the Narmada enters a *kamandal*, she does not remain the river Narmada. She becomes the water from the Narmada. If that water was poured back into the Narmada it would turn back into the Narmada river. Similarly, when I walk the next section of my *parikrama*, from being a city dweller I too will turn back into a *parikramavasi* once again.

Until then, I must stay in my kamandal.



## 15. Nareswar to Moriya

On October 3, 1998, I completed 70 years of my life. On the very next day, October 4, 1998, I was to set out again to continue the walk for the Narmada *parikrama*.

Friends and relatives had gathered at home on the occasion of my birthday.

"Fifty, 60, 70 are the major stations in life: they are the junctions. I am very glad to have arrived at this one. But now, there will be no more big stations. I will alight quietly at some obscure station," I had said.

"That's enough!" Kanta had protested. "For God's sake, be quiet!"

"At least one more junction will surely come," someone else had countered fervently.

In the afternoon of October 5th, we arrived at Nareswar, situated on the bank of Narmada in Gujarat. This time we were three: Ashok Tiwari had come along as had Chhotu. Tiwari had been a classmate of my son, so he too was like a son to me. We were given a good room to stay in at the temple complex at Nareswar. Someone had written on the door in Gujarati:



'No entry for poisonous creatures. By order—Astik Muni'

(It would be a good idea to put this restriction on humans too!) It was the night of the autumnal full moon, so we had *kheer* at the end of our meal at the *ashram*.

At midnight I stepped out to bathe in the moonlight. What bliss to be by the Narmada's side and that too on the night of autumn full moon!

The moon was overflowing with light. 'How could she amass so much wealth in a mere 15 days?' I wondered. But this wealth was not to be hoarded in some obscure Swiss bank account. It was to be lavished on the whole world; it was to be squandered until the moon became destitute again. Who indeed would be so generous? The sun too spends his resources lavishly but not to the extent of becoming bankrupt. The sun is an intellectual and does his work thoughtfully. The moon is emotional and gets carried away by its feelings.

Oh dear, I was getting carried away by my feelings too. Was it necessary to abuse one in order to praise the other? Wasn't that false criticism? On the contrary, the moon's entire wealth had been gifted to her by the sun. We had been under the delusion that her light was the property of the moon herself. The sun too might be harbouring this misconception, when he says to the moon: "The more your fame grows, the prouder I will feel." What a great gesture of generosity! 'Brother Sun, not only your rays are golden but so is your heart,' I thought. 'You are a benefactor: the moon is forever deep in your debt.'

(I know the sun will not willingly accept my praise, but surely none can deny that the moonlight was sunlight in previous birth.)

Oh dear, I was getting carried away by sentiment again, and doing an injustice to the moon. It is my failing that when I go to the Ganga, I become a Ganga devotee; when I go to the Jamuna, I become a Jamuna devotee. They should both get the credit. The raw material is from the sun and the finished product is of the moon. We would not get moonlight without the partnership between the sun and the moon. Both should get the credit.

We had wanted to begin our walk early the next morning but the soft-spoken Swami Atmakrishna invited us to look around the *ashram* and suggested that we leave in the afternoon. Atmakrishna had completed the Narmada *parikrama* and had also written an account of it in Gujarati. He

showed us around the whole *ashram*, which was founded by the saint Sri Rang Avdhut, who had been renowned for his service to humanity. The centenary of the saint's birth would be in December that year; preparations for the commemoration were already underway.

We left in the late afternoon and spent the night at Kothiya. There was plenty of milk available there and from the villages nearby. The entire milk production of the villages was collected at one spot and then taken by van to the city for distribution. Donkeys were used to transport the milk from the neighbouring villages in large cans that were hung on either side of the donkey. It was the first time I had seen donkeys used for this purpose. These milk-carrying donkeys ought to be more highly regarded than the potters' or washermen's donkeys. In modern language, the former are gazetted donkeys, the latter are non-gazetted donkeys.

We sat down to rest at Surasamal village. A woman who lived in the opposite house was quarrelling with another woman while moving to and fro on a swing. As her anger increased, so did the speed of her swinging. She would suddenly jump off the swing to argue right in the face of the other woman, and then resume her swinging again. Watching her, I had to admire her ability to reconcile these two contradictory activities—swinging and squabbling!

We were given an excellent room to stay in at the Satyanarayan Temple at Malsar and an evening meal as well. It was very warm that night; we slept out in the open. In the middle of the night, I saw a big luminous ring around the moon. If there were rings around the larger stars as well, what a grand ring festival there would be in the sky!

We were on our way again the next morning. The moon had not yet set. It gave out a splendid light, which was gradually extinguished with the rise of the sun. The *ghee*<sup>1</sup> in her lamp had not been used up. The sun had evaporated it. I felt sorry for the moon. The sun had vanquished her. The moon, however, behaves in the same way with the stars. The big fish swallows the small fish: that is the law of the sea, land and sky, applying equally to all three worlds.

We were walking through the lanes of Shinor, a town in the Vadodara District of Gujarat, when I noticed a sign: 'Ramanlal V Desai Road'. This was the birthplace of that great Gujarati novelist. The Narmada flowed right beside the road. In addition to Ramanlal V Desai,

<sup>1</sup>ghee: Clarified butter; here used as fuel for the oil lamp

there were Balwantray Thakor, the poet, writer and educationist; Kanhaiyalal M Munshi, the freedom fighter, politician, lawyer, writer and educationist who founded the educational trust, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan; Sundaram, the famous poet; Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, the educationist, musicologist and Hindustani classical music singer—all these learned Gujaratis were the gifts of the Narmada.

As we left Shinor, there was a creaky wooden footbridge over a ravine. We walked over it with extreme caution, as some of the slats were broken.

We reached Anusuya in the afternoon: it was a peaceful, beautiful place. The Narmada was far from the temple here, yet it had overflowed only three weeks earlier, flooding the temple grounds and inundating some parts of the temple. The rains had lasted longer than usual, eventually causing floods and wreaking much damage to the fields. There used to be a very large hospital for leprosy patients here on the bank of Narmada. Many parts of it became inundated during the 1970 floods, forcing the institution to shut down altogether.

The Anusuya Mata Temple looked very attractive in its setting amid fields with green crops waving in the breeze and big shady trees. It was very peaceful as the nearest village was quite far away. I stood on a little hill, watching the evening sun nestling into the lap of Narmada. I stood in silence as I watched the tip of the sun touching the horizon, and remained wrapped in utter silence until the sun had set completely. We stand in silence for two minutes to pay our homage to a deceased person. It seems to me that we have taken that period of two minutes from the setting sun.

We continued our journey the following morning through Moleta to Barkal. There was an island in the Narmada at this spot called 'Vyas Bet'. Bet means 'island' in Gujarati. Sukhdev Tirth<sup>2</sup> was situated on the opposite bank. Vyas was the father, Sukhdev, the son.

After bathing in the Narmada, we climbed up the high cliff. One village woman was a little ahead of me, on her way home after bathing and washing clothes, accompanied by a little girl. The child's mother would not pick her up, so to express her resentment the little girl stood still on the path, refusing to move ahead. Her mother coaxed and scolded her to no effect. Then I arrived and said, "Come on, daughter. Hold onto my

finger and let's walk along." She took my finger at once and began to walk slowly along with me. Her house was close by. Her mother put down her head-load and returned to fetch her daughter. She began to laugh when she saw the little girl willingly walking along, holding my finger. The neighbours were all smiling at the sight too. I was overwhelmed with joy. That dear little girl, like a ray of sunshine, gave me so much happiness by responding to my invitation.

We backtracked to Moleta to go to Badrika Ashram, wandering through fields of cotton and banana. Dusk drew near as we approached the *ashram*. An extremely lovely bend in the course of the Narmada was visible from the grounds of this huge *ashram*. It was one of the Narmada's most beautiful bends. Thanks to this bend in the river, both the towns of Chanod<sup>3</sup> and Karnali<sup>4</sup> could be seen. We remained there, gazing at the wondrous beauty of the Narmada until it was dark.

We slept on the roof of the *ashram* that night. It was extremely hot. I woke up in the middle of the night to see the moon gleaming in the sky. It was the fourth day of the 'dark fortnight'. It seemed to me that we have done an injustice to the moon of the 'dark fortnight'. On the night after the full moon, there is an almost full moon with its still-generous moonlight, but the date of the period plummets suddenly from 15 (which ends the 'bright fortnight') to 1 (beginning the 'dark fortnight') in the Hindu lunar calendar. How can the moon go from its full 15 parts down to 1 overnight? Just as the 'bright fortnight' increases stage by stage, so too the 'dark fortnight' decreases stage by stage. Therefore the dates should have been in the reverse order in the 'dark fortnight': 14, 13, 12, 11 . . . The 'bright fortnight' dates are more logical: as the size of the moon increases, the date increases. The dates of the dark fortnight are not logical: as the moon diminishes, the date increases.

Yet it seemed right according to tradition to begin from the count of one in the 'dark fortnight'. Tradition knows that counting in the reverse order would not be acceptable: it only accepts counting in increasing sequence. So, all right then: as the moonlight decreases the number of the dates increases!

<sup>3</sup>Chanod: Considered to be one of the most sacred towns in the state of Gujarat, Chanod is known for its meticulous observance of Hindu death rituals

<sup>4</sup>Karnali: One of the most beautiful and peaceful pilgrimage sites in Gujarat on the Narmada riverbank, Karnali is also known as the 'Benaras of the South'

<sup>2</sup>Tirth: A place of religious pilgrimage, especially by a river or a lake

We had walked a little way the following morning when we came to the Ganganath Temple. There was a national school there that had been set up before Independence: the Ganganath College, where Indian revolutionaries against the British rule in India had found shelter. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh<sup>5</sup> who had begun his political career as a revolutionary, might also have come here.

Three kilometres ahead lay Chanod. The Chanod waterfront must have been splendid once but it had suffered heavy damage due to the recent floods.

We spent the mid-day hours on the waterfront. A river called the Aur meets the Narmada here. After bathing at the confluence of the two rivers, we went on to Karnali, which was smaller than Chanod. There were a number of temples in both places, the older ones falling down in disrepair, while new ones were being built.

We walked on a path, and could feel the rising heat waves. Heat does not trouble me at all; my slight body walked along quite happily. At one point we came to a deep dry ravine and descended into it. Tiwari and Chhotu climbed up the far side easily, but I lagged behind. A middle-aged cowherd was grazing cattle on a nearby hillside. Seeing me make slower progress than Tiwari and Chhotu, he looked at them and shouted: "Stop, stop, the old fellow is tired!"

Clearly it was obvious even from a distance that I was an old fellow!

The local pronunciation of the Gujarati dialect in the Karnali area made it sound like Bengali; it seemed as if Bengalis were speaking Gujarati because of the rounded vowels. Spoken Bengali and Gujarati most resemble each other in the Khera and Vadodara districts. It was odd that there should be such a similarity of the phonetics of the two languages which are spoken at the opposite ends of India.

In the evening we reached the village of Moriya. We put our luggage down in the verandah of the primary school there and headed to the bank of the Narmada. Big chunks of cliff had broken off due to the floods. The path had become perilous. Nevertheless, both the water-carriers and cattle walked on it as if it was still in its former condition. The water-carriers though were no doubt being extremely careful.

<sup>5</sup>Sri Aurobindo Ghosh: An Indian nationalist and freedom fighter. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) was initially engaged in civil works under the Maharaja of Baroda. A poet, philosopher, spiritual leader and mystic, he founded the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in the south of India, as a retreat and commune for the spiritually-inclined

There was no *dharmshala* here. All pilgrims stayed in the verandah of the primary school. The farmer whose house and fields were beside the school had donated the land for the school. He willingly served the needs of the pilgrims. It had become quite dark when I sought him out and asked him, "If we give you some wheat flour, would you mind giving us some *jowar* or *bajra* millet *chappatis* in exchange?"

"We'll be happy to give them," he responded, "but there's no need to give me any wheat flour in exchange."

In a little while, his wife brought some *bajra roti*. She refused to take any flour in exchange. The farmer and his wife were ordinary people; not rich yet very generous.

In the morning, we took our breakfast we had carried with us. Lunch was rather a day-dream. Cooked meal was prepared daily in the evenings. In one way, that chore of meal preparation had become a little easier. I would ask a housewife in a nearby house if she would kindly cook millet bread for us as Chhotu did not know how to handle millet flour. Rarely would anyone refuse. Sometimes, a woman would cook a whole meal for us.

The taste of simple, plain food was also very acceptable. There were two reasons for this: one was our huge appetite and the other was that food cooked over a wood fire has an amazing flavour. Chemical fertilisers take away the true taste of food, and cooking on a gas stove further diminishes the remaining flavour. Now how can the natural taste prevail? Where there is no natural taste, a variety of spices are added to overcome the very tastelessness of the food (in a way hindering the conversation between the natural flavours of food and the eater). This is the acceptable modern method of cooking, even if it results in bad health.

Just as an earthenware pot enhances the flavour of curd, so does a wood fire enhance the taste of food cooked over it, but we town-dwellers are deprived of this pleasure. Food without flavour is like a nest without a bird.

We slept on the verandah. That night was coming to an end. As I lay half-awake, wrapped in a sheet, I felt something climb onto my foot. At once I imagined the worst: 'It must be a snake!' I froze with fear, remaining very still, but the creature refused to go away. I sat up very slowly and carefully and saw—a frog!

This was sheer impudence! If I wished, I could have given it a scare that it would have remembered for the rest of its life, but I merely said: "I don't want blood-shed. So I will not fight with you. Go away!"



## 16. Moriya to Kolamba

A rivulet named Ashwin clung to Mother Earth. We were startled to see the sheer beauty of its curves. It met the Narmada at a near distance but before the confluence, it ran along, skipping and flexing its muscles.

Women from the nearby Chureswar village came here to bathe and fill their water pots. A little spring gushed from the cliff above the river. I watched a woman filling a vessel with water; a few other women were standing nearby. All the women had folded their saris and petticoats high up, baring their thighs completely. Such well-formed, lovely thighs; as firm as if they had been hammered into shape. I revered those thighs—they were as holy as the banks of the Ganga.

God made the human body so beautiful and perfect that there is not the least scope for improvement. But we have made it ugly by neglecting hard work and adopting a wrong diet. How many city women would dare to bare themselves like this? How many men could wear only a loincloth like Mahatma Gandhi? We deform our shapely body with layers of fat. We bequeath a wealth of fat to our children and thus the journey of fat

goes on from generation to generation.

The beauty of these slim women—daughters of Narmada—was not due to their natural youthfulness but due to their hard work. The true god of beauty is not cupid but hard work. The pearl of beauty is not to be found in the beauty parlour but produced in the shell of hard work. Beauty is a by-product of hard work.

But where on earth have I wandered off? This is far off the point. A future critic would say that this part was not written by the original author but added by somebody else. It is an interpolation.

At mid-day we reached Tilakwara, a large village at the confluence of the Men River and the Narmada. We crossed the Men by boat. Soon we came to Maninageswar, where there was nothing but a small temple, but the view of the river from this spot was very attractive.

Ahead was Muni Maharaj's hut. Muni Maharaj, a silent *sadhu*, was out. One of his devotees, a storyteller and a chanter of *kirtans*, who stayed there occasionally, was there at the time of our arrival. He made the arrangements for us to stay. A talkative man, he used the stylised rhetoric of traditional storytellers in conversation. He would say: "I don't like to eat without bathing . . ." and then pause.

He would say nothing more until I interjected with, ". . . first!" and only then would he continue: "I don't like to eat without worshipping . . ." ". . . first!" This became the obligatory response. It was becoming tedious. It seemed it was compulsory for me to complete his sentences. However I soon realised that whenever he stopped talking, the required final word would be "first!" so I no longer needed to pay much attention to what he had to say. Whenever he paused, I would automatically say, ". . . first!"

If "last" instead of "first" had been my response, he would have no doubt become angry, but I ensured that it was never the case.

That devotee caused another problem that night. He was a heavy sleeper. All the notes of 'sweet' music escaped from his nose during his sleep. Suddenly, there would be a flood of tunes, and then peace would descend for a while. His nostrils strummed the banjo. Luckily, it was not necessary to complete the melody . . . first!

Muni Maharaj returned at night. He rose early the next morning and got busy with the daily chores. He swept the whole yard, cleaned the arti-

cles used for worship, and opened the door of the temple. He did not speak; he had maintained his vow of silence for the last 14 years.

That day we left rather early and came to a road running parallel to the Narmada. Soon we reached Akateswar Bridge, and then Garudeswar. We went to the Dutta Temple, bathed at the temple *ghat* and had our lunch in the temple dining hall. Then off we went again.

Next, we reached the Kaveriya Colony. I was concerned about where to stay, as a *dharmshala* would not be a feature of a government housing estate. Then we caught sight of the Kaveriya Colony Government Tourist Hotel and enquired if there was a room available there. The manager told us that the rent for a room was Rs.150 a day, but that further on there was an officers' hostel, where we could get a room for only Rs. 30. The manager at the officers' hostel in turn informed us that if we went a little further, there was a temple and a *dharmshala* right beside the Narmada where we would not have to pay anything at all.

What more could we want! We went straight there. It was a beautiful place too, with the Narmada flowing nearby and a lovely mountain on the far side promising us solitude. We had made the right decision to go there for the night. The next morning, we went to see the Sardar Sarovar dam. We would have had to backtrack in order to continue our journey, so we left our luggage at the *dharmshala*. First we saw the Gora Bridge across the Narmada. The Shulpaneswar Temple was visible on the far bank, nestled among the mountains. Its original site had been submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam, but before that the original temple had been rebuilt as it had been before, on the hill opposite Gora village.

We reached the dam in two hours by a hilly road. A smooth steady sheet of water fell from the top of the dam. It lacked the thrill of a natural waterfall, but it was interesting to watch the water droplets converting into cloud. We wanted to see the lake (the reservoir) behind the dam, so we followed a road going up on the left to an empty tank. From there, in the company of a villager who came along to show us the reservoir, we soon reached there.

So this was the Sardar Sarovar! The Narmada had flowed unrestrained for so many years, but now her flow would be controlled by the Sardar Sarovar and other dams.

I was afraid that Sardar Sarovar would spoil the beauty of Narmada,

rather its very existence may be in danger. 'Sarovar' is a bit misleading. This is not a lake. Narmada is not lost in a lake. Narmada is still Narmada, only its water level has gone up. It has deepened and also widened a bit. But there is no change in its shape. A lean and thin Narmada had now become voluptuous. Before her store was empty, now it is full all the year round.

There were a few motorboats plying on the river which we could see from where we were standing. They were intended as a service to the tribals living at Shulpan Jhari: every boat brought tribals to the Kaveriya Colony market and took them back again. There were tribals from both Gujarat and Maharashtra in those boats; the two-way service was provided free to them.

Pilgrims cannot go to the Sardar Sarovar because they would have to return to the Kaveriya Colony and they are not allowed to backtrack. Most pilgrims do not go to Kaveriya either; they go straight to Kavant from Garudesar. Had we too done so, we would have missed the sight of the most beautiful stretch of the Narmada in Gujarat, flowing between the mountains.

We came back to Kaveriya and continued our journey in the afternoon. Our route took us by road to meet the Narmada at Hapeswar. There were clouds in the sky and a rainbow over the mountain range on the right—not a complete bow but just an arc.

Who has broken this arc!

We arrived at Tankhala in the evening. There was a Shiva temple outside the village, where we stayed.

"As long as the Narmada is out of sight, I am not going to eat solid food. I will only take milk," announced Tiwari. He was unpredictable. Sometimes he would suddenly retreat into a period of silence. At other times he would sit for hours in a yogic posture. He was half a familyman and half a recluse. There was a sense of detachment from worldly concerns in his eyes. Sometimes he would suddenly exclaim to some invisible listener, "What a game it all is, Lord!" He was a devotee of Sri Aurobindo. He has taken his great epic *Savitri*<sup>1</sup> with him on his walk. Whenever he

<sup>1</sup>*Savitri*: An epic poem by Sri Aurobindo, it was published in its entirety in book form in two parts in 1950 and 1951. It centres on the theology of the epic, the *Mahabharata*, highlighting the victory over ignorance and death, and of a tribing man as the 'consummation of terrestrial evolution'. Running to 24,000 lines, it was left unfinished at the time of Sri Aurobindo's death on December 5, 1950

found the time he would read it.

Every day Tiwari would write a postcard to his mother who stayed at home. Whenever he came across a post office, he would post all the accumulated postcards together. Now and then he would go on a fast. Still, he walked the fastest of us all. One night I noticed that Tiwari was fast asleep but that his torch was switched on. I thought he must have forgotten about it, so I switched it off. The next night it was shining once more so I switched it off again. When I mentioned this to Tiwari, he said he was not used to sleeping in the dark. As long as there was a light, he could get to sleep. He had brought the torch as a night light!

The young priest at the Shiva temple was kind and generous. He made very good arrangements for our stay. As if that was not enough, he invited us: "Please have your meal with me."

"Kaka, shun banau?" ("What shall I prepare, uncle?") asked his slender, open-hearted wife.

"Shun jamwani ichha chhe?" ("What would you like to eat?")

We were welcomed as warmly as if we had come to our daughter's home. We enjoyed the meal thoroughly and blessed the priest's wife. Tiwari, however, only drank some milk.

Heavy rain began to fall in the middle of the night. It poured continuously for an hour and a half. The sky was still overcast when we woke up in the morning. The priest suggested that we stay on. Soon, it began to drizzle; it was not really raining—only pretending to—but that drizzle held us up for two hours. As soon as it ceased, we left.

We reached Kolamba by way of Nasavari. There was a temple far from the road, among fields of green crops, in the middle of a grove of *ambabool*<sup>2</sup> trees. It was a beautiful, peaceful and isolated place for us to rest overnight.

The night was dark and frightening and the temple was deserted and desolate. Wind began gusting at intervals after midnight; lightning flashed repeatedly. It began to drizzle, and then the rain came down hard. A storm raged outside.

I felt that the earth must have spun out of its orbit around the sun at a moment like this. When was the beginning of time, I wondered. Was it when the earth began to circumambulate the sun? Did time ever have

<sup>2</sup>*Ambabool*: A fast-growing, hardy, evergreen tree found mainly in the coastal areas

a beginning or is it eternal?

Is time linear or circular?

A river appears to be linear but it is really a circular phenomenon. Seawater rises as vapour to form clouds; the clouds release the rainwater to form a river which flows back to the sea. And thus the cycle is complete. Time too appears to be linear but could it not be circular too? The River of Time may flow into some huge ocean; from there it may somehow vaporise and return to its starting point, and in this way the flow of time might be circular and unending.

Is time like a horse or like a bullock on a treadmill, which keeps trudging on and on, but always returning to the same place? Is the past the ancestor of the future exist along with the past?

It would be a good idea for someone to invent a boat to cross over the Ocean of Time, to be able to come and go through the three time-lines—the past, the present and the future. We have all sorts of vehicles to get us from one place to another, but not even one for time travel. If this could be invented, it would really be a 'victory over time'. To control time is extremely difficult, almost impossible, compared to controlling space.

A whirlwind of thoughts swirled in my mind. When the earth did not exist, the sun existed, but there was no sunrise or sunset, day or night, the passage of years, nor the change of seasons. All these occurred only after the earth came into being. The earth gave relevance to the sun. If the earth had not come into being, the sun would have been rendered meaningless. Who would see the sun shining in the sky? If the earth did not exist, the solar system would be lifeless and barren. The sun certainly has other children but they were stillborn. None of them can support living beings. The living creation of the sun is the earth.

Hey, now what am I saying? If Saturn had heard me saying that he was a lifeless son of the sun, it would not do me any good at all. My 'Saturn Return'<sup>3</sup> would begin the very next day. I am more afraid of Saturn than of the sun! O Lord Saturn! Forgive me my sin and bestow a blessing instead of a curse. O Saturn and Sun—I have had my say and will say no more.

<sup>3</sup>'Saturn Return': In horoscopic astrology, it is believed that Saturn returns to the position it occupied in the cosmos at the time of a person's birth every 29.4 years, which is the time the planet takes to orbit around the sun. Its 'return' is said to mark the major transitional milestones in life: from birth to youth, from youth to adulthood and from adulthood to old age



## 17. Kolamba to Hatnisangam

There was never any shortage of rain to bother us on this trip. It rained every single day. It was the kind of weather that made one want to stop for a 'rain retreat' but we were determined to maintain the pace of our progress. We struggled along muddy pathways and reached the road, but the road was not in a good condition either. At some places the water level had risen so high that it flowed over a bridge, and at other places, detours had been formed around badly-damaged bridges. We saw the water flowing merrily in a little river called the 'Sukhi' which means 'dried up'. Each and every stream and ravine was brimming with muddy water. We met the Ashwin River again further on; the Ashwin, whose beautiful curves we had not forgotten.

We stayed the night at Bhekhariya and reached Kavant by noon the next day. It was a big village, with a Gayatri temple at the edge of the village where the open fields began. We stayed the night there. It was extremely hot. We settled down to sleep on the terrace but after a while it began to drizzle, so we had to go back indoors. Downstairs, in the room where we were trying to sleep, there were a number of black insects buzzing



around the light bulb. They did not bite us but crept inside our clothes and crawled all over our bodies. They were extremely troublesome to deal with. As soon as the drizzle stopped, we went back up to the terrace.

"How rotten hot it is!" exclaimed Chhotu, using a well-known Hindi phrase.

"Not 'rotten'" I replied, "say 'How stale hot it is'."

In Hindi, 'rotten hot' has become an overused idiom; a cliché. 'Stale hot' would be a fresh idiom. When such idiomatic expressions are first used they sound fresh and vigorous, but a time comes when because of overuse, their freshness withers away. Then we need to think of new idioms to replace them.

The night sky cleared and the stars seemed very bright, but after a while a little cloud drifted by and veiled the constellation at which I was gazing. As the cloud sailed away, the moon appeared—a thin sliver of a moon. It looked quite worn out from continuously giving out moonlight.

As we walked on the next morning, the whole village seemed to be sparkling from the previous night's rain. The green foliage looked freshened up. Karipani was 12 kilometres from Kavant, approached by a road all the way. Hapeswar, where we would meet the Narmada again, was a further eight kilometres. We came across an ancient step-well along the way: it was a beautiful structure with seven levels. Then we arrived at the ruins of a palace of a long-gone king. Now it looked like a big cow-shed—where once queens were impounded.

When we reached Karipani, the noble priest at the temple sat us down and served us lunch. Then we were on our way again, following a pathway.

After a little while we came to a mountain stream. Our path ahead intertwined with this stream: sometimes it veered to one side, sometimes to the other. We had to criss-cross the stream time and again!

We had been told that there was no question of losing our way if we stuck to the course of the stream, which flowed through a long and narrow ravine, walled by mountains on both sides. It felt as if we were passing through the corridor of an ancient mansion. We criss-crossed the stream no less than 60 times. Our way was originally a proper road, but it had been badly damaged during the monsoon and had degenerated into a rough path. It was scheduled to be repaired after the monsoon.

The rain showers had held up twice: night had fallen by the time we reached Hapeswar. We could now see the Narmada once again after a gap of four days. It was as if we had spent those four days in the Narmada's waiting room. We stayed at a large temple which provided good accommodation and meals.

Tiwari resumed eating solid food again that day. We had walked 20 kilometres in one day; the last eight, which were along the stream, were really tough. Quite exhausted, we fell asleep early.

We woke up the next morning to strains of a devotional song playing on the chief priest's radio:

*"Avat hi harsanhi nahi, naynan nahi saneh.*

*Tulsi waha na jaiye, kanchan barse meh."*

*(Where one is not welcomed with delight: or no affection in the eyes,  
Don't go there, Tulsi, even if the clouds are showering gold).*

It was so enchanting to listen to the devotional song as the day dawned!

The sky had cleared and there was a touch of autumn in the air. I went to sit on the bank of the Narmada. Her beauty, now as calm as a lake, pervaded my heart. When I had walked along the opposite bank 13 years ago, the entire river had appeared emptied out as the water level had sunk very low. We had cooked our lunch at a spot right across on the opposite bank. Now the Narmada was brimming with water. Hapeswar was in Shulpan Jhari—a vast wilderness cut off from the rest of the world. There was a magnetic attraction in its deep mysterious recesses.

After about an hour Tiwari and Chhotu came by to give me disturbing news.

"The chief priest of the temple asked us: 'Why haven't you people left? The pipe-line is broken, there's no water. The electricity failed two days ago too. Off you go!' He said this twice, very emphatically," they told me.

This was an unforeseen calamity. The following day would be *Diwali*, which I had hoped to celebrate here at Hapeswar, and the next day we were expecting two more friends to join us on our walk. We had asked them to meet us at Hapeswar. I remembered the words of a song I had heard just that morning:

"Don't you go, Tulsi, even if the clouds are showering rain".

I wondered if the priest had formed a mistaken impression of us. Tiwari was wearing shorts; Chhotu, long trousers and I, loose pyjama-style trousers. He may not have realised that we were pilgrims. Otherwise, good service was always given to pilgrims at this temple; we had heard of the chief priest's excellent reputation. It would not be right to doubt him because of one mistake on his part.

Now, however, it would not be possible for us to stay on. We went back to the temple, packed our bags, paid our respects to the chief priest and left.

Hapeswar was scheduled to be submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam project. Most of the displaced villagers had already left. There was no other place to stay; and going back the way we had come was our only option. After a short while, we once again came upon the stream (rather, the tiny river) that we had earlier crossed repeatedly. For all its abundance of charming curves, it had no name. "Tiwari, think of a name for it," I urged.

After some thought, Tiwari announced the name: "Vallari."

"Great!" I replied, pleased with the choice. "There is music in that name! 'Vallari'—because it is like an entwining vine."

Now and then, we would come across Bhil men and women. We watched the Bhil women catch fish by holding out the free end of their saris and scooping the fish from the water with their makeshift 'fishing net'. When questioned, they briefly replied in a word or two, but always with a sweet smile. They tended to speak in monosyllables, rarely articulating a complete sentence. The Bhil women were like haiku<sup>1</sup> poets!

I would guess that at the dawn of civilisation people did not speak much, certainly not as volubly as we talk today. Talkativeness is a product of civilisation (What verbal onslaughts we are subjected to by our TV channels and newspapers!) Culture prefers silence.

The chief priest had sent us away but we were reluctant to leave the loveliness of the mountainscape of Hapeswar. We really did want to spend more time there. 'We won't be spending *Diwali* there,' was the sad thought that repeatedly came to mind. We had walked for two kilometres when we came to Padar, a hamlet of a few shanties. The headman gave us

permission to stay in the village council room. This village and the surrounding hamlets were still within the Hapeswar limits; though we could not stay at the temple at Hapeswar, at least we could remain within the locality. 'O God!' I thought, 'If I have not done good enough deeds to live in your village after my death, it would be quite enough to be allowed to live in the outskirts.'

In the evening I went back to the temple area of Hapeswar and sat for a while on the riverbank. Then I went into the temple and admired the murals painted inside the cupolas before returning to Padar. It had suddenly become cold at night; the next morning was wrapped in mist. As the sun rose the mist began to disperse. Wisps of mist lingered over the stream.

It was *Diwali* that day. We had been expecting two friends from Jabalpur to join us. As the way from Karipani was extremely tough, I sent Chhotu and Tiwari there to escort our friends to Padar. For quite some time, there was no sign of them. I became a little anxious, so I too set out, and on the way I met both Tiwari and Chhotu returning by themselves. My friends had not yet arrived.

When I had gone to Hapeswar that morning, I did not bathe in the Narmada, thinking that I would bathe along with my friends. As they still had not arrived, Tiwari, Chhotu and I went to the Hapeswar riverbank and bathed in the Narmada. At last my wish for a *Diwali* bath at Hapeswar was fulfilled. I felt very peaceful. This would be our last bath in the Narmada in Gujarat. We would meet the Narmada next at Hatnisangam in Madhya Pradesh.

When we went back to Padar, we found our newly-arrived friends Jagdishram and his elder brother Bhagwandas strolling about. I felt I would burst with joy. Jagdishram was that Mr E who had wanted to come along with his brother on our last walk, but he was prevented by a foot problem. Jagdishram was 58 years old and his elder brother 75, yet the latter was quite strong despite his age. The elder brother looked like an Englishman with his fair skin and his tall and broad frame. There was such a deep affection between the two brothers that they always went on pilgrimages together.

Jagdishram ran a bookshop in Jabalpur while his elder brother had another in Chandigarh, which was known to be one of the best-stocked

<sup>1</sup>haiku: A form of Japanese short poetry, the haiku is composed of 17 short syllables (a single unit of sound). The content, while appearing deceptively simple, is usually profound

bookshops in Asia. Forgetting their business, both of them had arrived to undertake the pilgrimage on foot along the Narmada. A walking pilgrimage implies travelling light, but these two brothers had brought along everything but the kitchen sink. They had so much stuff that they had to hire two villagers as porters. Jagdishram affectionately called his elder brother 'Kakaji'<sup>2</sup>. Soon, we were all calling him 'Kakaji' too.

After two nights at Padar we set out, heading back through Karipani to Kavant. We reached Bakhatgarh by the evening. In spite of its imposing name, implying a stronghold, Bakhatgarh was a rather small and isolated village. This was where Gujarat ends and Madhya Pradesh begins. Bakhatgarh was in the Jhabua District of Madhya Pradesh. I had brought along an official letter from the Superintendent of Police (SP) of Jhabua and Dhar, which held instructions for arrangements for our protection, as we would be passing through unsafe territory in the walk ahead. We went straight to the police station. An extremely humble police officer touched our feet. "Where would we find people like you?" he said. "An official order in connection with your protection has come. Please have no anxiety at all."

The young postmaster at Bakhatgarh was also eager to be of service. There was nothing lacking in the facilities that were offered to us to stay in comfort. We were given a place to sleep in a temple that night.

"There are a lot of *daddoos* here!" Kakaji commented at bedtime. We thought he meant *laddoos*, the popular Indian sweet. Afterwards we found out that *daddoo* means 'frog' in Punjabi. Truly, there were plenty of frogs. The next morning Kakaji told us: "A couple of times the frogs jumped onto my neck. I was afraid of squashing them with my bulky body when I turned over—I would have not only killed them but messed up my bedding in the process!" Every morning when he woke up, Kakaji would intone: "O Mighty One! O Mighty One! You are the only One. Take care of us. Feed us and grant us our livelihood."

We forged ahead the next morning. Now we had two policemen accompanying us as well, along with two villagers to carry the luggage. Along with the five of us who were undertaking the walk, we had become a caravan of nine people. We stayed that night at Umrath, and the following night at Temala. We walked on from Temala the next morning. At noon we came to a broad river: the Hatni. Crossing the Hatni, we arrived

at Kakarana. We could see the confluence of the Hatni and the Narmada from the village, so we decided to go right up to that spot. At the splendid sight of the Narmada surrounded by majestic mountains, a spontaneous cry of "Glory to Mother Narmada!" escaped my lips. Everyone repeated joyfully: "Glory to Mother Narmada!"

We were viewing the Narmada again after four days when she had been hidden from our sight. Hatnisangam was a supremely beautiful place: the confluence of the Narmada and the Hatni was lovely beyond words. A mountain reared up like an elephant at the central point between the Narmada and the Hatni. On top of that mountain there was a shrine and a ruined *dharmshala* that looked as tiny as toys. Nobody stayed up there though. Pilgrims preferred to stay at the spacious shanty of Balloo Kevat, a boat-owner. We stayed there too. It was a solitary shack, facing the river. There was a glorious view of the valley below with the Narmada flowing by and the splendid vista of the mountains on the far side.

Balloo had a motor boat, in which he ferried people across the Narmada. His son piloted a government-owned motor boat. Balloo was an exceptional boatman. He told us this story:

"This is what happened about 15 years ago. Two Bhils bought three buffaloes from the other side of the river; they had to transport them over to this side. That was a tricky job. I had a big boat. Two buffalos were tethered, one on either side of the boat and the third buffalo was secured in the middle, keeping them all apart so that they wouldn't fight each other. Right in mid-stream, the buffaloes pulled free from their ropes and began to fight. Buffalo fights are very fierce. The boat started rocking violently and began to fill with water. All three buffaloes toppled into the water. The older boatman abandoned the sinking boat and called out to the Bhils who owned the buffaloes to jump off the boat too. One of them obeyed him but the other refused to leave the boat, though the boatman urged him to do so over and over again. We never found out what became of him or the boat."

The two boatmen in the story were a maternal uncle and his nephew. The uncle had saved himself but his nephew who had also refused to abandon the boat had presumably been dragged down with it when it sank. There was no trace of the boat or the nephew after the incident.

<sup>2</sup>Kakaji: 'Kaka' refers to one's father's younger brother; 'ji' is added to show respect

Perhaps the uncle and nephew should not have been in the boat together.

"Why did the nephew refuse to leave the boat?" I asked Balloo.

"The nephew had quarrelled with his wife. After beating her up severely he left home, saying 'Now you'll never see me alive again!' And that is just what happened," Balloo replied.

"What happened to the buffaloes?" I wanted to know.

"They swam back to the opposite bank and returned to their former owner's house."

"Well, are there any crocodiles here?"

"Not here," said Balloo, adding: "but there are plenty downstream."

I was worried. A group of marathon swimmers from Jabalpur were on their way to this very spot, swimming downriver. Noticing my anxiety, Balloo said reassuringly, "Men are afraid of crocodiles but crocodiles are just as afraid of men. They are even wary of a dead body. They will inspect it from all angles and only go near it when they are quite sure it is dead. Crocodiles are never aggressive without reason. There's nothing to worry about."

An unknown sculptor of the mountains had inscribed these words on a rock at the confluence: 'Shree Narmadaji Kakarana'.

## श्रीनर्मदाजीकरणा

The beautiful curves of the letters of the first word competed with the graceful curves of the Hatni. That first artistically-drawn word was surely inscribed when the sculptor was in a romantic mood; the following letters looked more straight-forward and practical.

In my opinion, in a marriage, one partner should be romantically inclined while the other should be more practical. If both are romantics, they would not be able to earn their daily bread, and if both are no-nonsense and practical, their life together would be very prosaic and boring.

We slept in Balloo's shanty that night. A cock, a hen and their chicks were housed in a covered basket that hung suspended from the ceiling. As the morning approached, we found that the poultry family had decorated the floor with their droppings. Chhotu's sheet too was polka-dotted with them and I found that I had been similarly endowed with my

share. The cock looked very content after having done his job. I had hoped that he would crow to wake us up in the morning. Quite the reverse: it was I who had to wake him up.

We walked along the riverside that morning. There were endless mountain ranges on both sides of the river. The Narmada sets out from the eastern border of Madhya Pradesh and when she reaches the border on the western side, beyond which lie the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, she remembers her relatives the mountains, for she was born of them. So at the meeting point of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Narmada is protected by her family of innumerable mountains which stand guard on either side of the river. And which could these mountains be but the Vindhyas and Satpuras? These great ranges run across central India almost parallel to each other, dividing the sub-continent into the northern half above the Vindhyas and the southern half below the Satpuras. In Shulpan Jhari, both the brother ranges seem to reassure their sister, the Narmada, flowing in between them: "Never fear, we are here!"

If the River Ganga were to come here, this thought would surely occur to her: 'After I stepped over the threshold of my Father Himalaya's house at Haridwar, he never came to enquire about my well-being.' But how far afield can an aged father go to take care of his daughter? That is the responsibility of her brothers. Alas, the Ganga has no brothers like the Vindhyas and the Satpuras!



## 18. Hatnisangam to Dharmपुरi

Mountains like meditating sages, rocks like steel, sharp bends, a profound silence, the singular beauty of the landscape and the river Narmada flowing in all her splendour between the high mountains: that is Shulpan Jhari.

This is also the playground of the Narmada. The dancing Narmada, as well as the introspective Narmada, both these aspects of the Narmada could be found only in the wilderness of Shulpan Jhari. The river, wearing a veil of mystery, at some places, gave not the slightest hint of her flow, while at other places she swirled into the rapids. How adorable the Narmada looked in her indignation, elbowing her way among the boulders! The monsoon had only just come to an end, and the mountains were draped in a mantle of rich green foliage. In the stark and fearful wilderness of Shulpan Jhari however, one was hard put to spot even a tiny sparrow.

We penetrated Shulpan Jhari from Hatnisangam. This journey was, for me, like going back into the past. Thirteen years ago, I had walked along the opposite bank. It all came back to me like the events of yester-

day, as if the intervening 13 years had never been.

We had heard that pilgrims could be robbed at any point after Hatnisangam, but Balloo Kevat had said this was not so. The real danger began at Katarkhera, the next village.

We arrived there in the afternoon. There were merely a few shanties on the riverbank; the village itself was two kilometres away from the river. We went there and were welcomed by the headman, who invited us to stay and eat at his own house. The food was divine: cornmeal *rotis* first, followed by millet *rotis*, and then wheat *rotis*! While we sat and chatted after the meal, a group of 15 to 20 villagers came along.

"We heard that some pilgrims had arrived in our village," they said, "so we came to meet you."

Such a warm welcome in a reputedly dangerous village deep in the wilderness! After a little conversation, I asked them, "Are you people Bhil, Bhilala or Nayak?"

"We are Charan<sup>1</sup>," they replied.

I was surprised to hear the word 'Charan'. The Charans lived either in Rajasthan or in Gujarat, and here they were in a village in Madhya Pradesh.

"Did you come here from Rajasthan?" I asked.

"No, we are from Saurashtra."

"You're from Saurashtra? Do you speak Gujarati?"

"Yes, we speak Gujarati at home," they confirmed.

So we continued our conversation in Gujarati. Though their ancestors had settled at Katarkhera about a century ago, they had not forgotten the Gujarati '*ras*' and '*garba*'<sup>2</sup> dances, nor the songs. Most members of their community lived in Kalyanpura, a village in the Jhabua District, where there were 150 Charan households, while there were about 20 or so at Katarkhera.

"Aren't you people afraid of the Bhils?" I wanted to know.

"Afraid? How could we live here if we were afraid?"

Come by to our Charan area in the morning for a cup of tea, and then you can carry on."

<sup>1</sup>Charan: A caste believed to have descended from the divine

<sup>2</sup>*ras* and *garba*: Traditional folk dances popular in Gujarat

Look at the tricks played by Fortune: these Charans had left Gujarat to settle in Madhya Pradesh, while the Bhils from Madhya Pradesh had left to live in Gujarat! The villages situated on the Narmada riverbank will be submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam project, so the displaced Bhils from this area had been given land in Gujarat. Three-quarters of the Bhils had left their original dwellings, and as a result, the incidents of banditry that they were notorious for had become much less frequent.

That night a goat kid slept at my feet. There were some chickens roaming around as well. A heap of corn cobs were stacked on one side of the room while a pile of cotton lay on the other.

In the morning we went to the Charan chief's house. I asked him: "Do you have bows and arrows?"

"No, but we have catapults. They're much better. Arrows run out, stones certainly don't!"

A new problem had cropped up that day. The policemen, who had come from Jhabua (who had been assigned to the village) had returned to Jhabua. They were to be replaced by the policemen from the Dhar District, who had not yet arrived. The Dhar police team was supposed to come from the Dahi sub-station, which was 10 kilometres away. It would take the best part of the day to go there and enquire into the matter. Finally, I sent Tiwari to Dahi by bicycle. When he came back he reported: "No orders have come from the SP of Dhar to the Dahi sub-station, so the sub-inspector there flatly refuses to send any policemen."

Just when we most needed police protection, there was none available! There was real danger ahead in the villages of Dasana and Kasta, as pilgrims were being routinely robbed mainly in the vicinity of those two villages. Beyond those two villages was Dharmray; there was no danger from there onwards. There was now no other way to get to Dharmray safely except by road through Dahi. I was deeply disappointed. Would we really have to leave the wilderness without even a peep at it?

However, just when all other doors seemed to be closing in every direction, a single door opened and help arrived. The Charan chief had a 24-year-old son called Mansingh: handsome of face, slim of figure, with a shy and beautiful nature. Noticing that I was upset, he said: "What's the problem? I'll take you through the wilderness."

He was voluntarily offering to give us protection through the wilder-

ness all by himself. We looked at him in astonishment. However could such a slender young man protect us from the dreaded Bhils?

I believe in following my intuition. I sensed that though Mansingh had a shy nature, he was quite untouched by fear. We gained courage from his quiet resolve. We were prepared to run the risk of trekking through the wilderness if he was with us. As the porters who had carried our luggage up to this point were unwilling to go further, they were sent back. Instead, we took two of Mansingh's friends to accompany us.

After staying two nights in Katarkhera, our caravan set off in the early morning with those Charan guards. We made our way towards the most dangerous villages in the wilderness. Everyone was in high spirits. We drank in great draughts of fresh air with every breath. We were walking up a rough mountain path; the circle of mountains closed in around us. The Narmada had to struggle hard to make her way through these mountains, but she was most lively and dynamic while meeting the challenge. The Narmada was now far below us but the spray of her beauty rose up to touch us.

After two hours we came to Dasana, a little village of dilapidated shanties. Catching sight of Mansingh, the village chief waved us onwards: "Go, go!" he urged. It was the people of these two villages who robbed the pilgrims.

At one spot Mansingh informed us: "This place is called 'Kalapani'—'black water'. The Narmada is so deep here that nobody can plumb her depths. If ever I were to receive a 'kalapani' life sentence, I would wish to be confined here. Punishment here would be sweeter than any reward."

After Dasana we came to Kasta. Now we were walking along a lower path. The muddy water of the river had turned completely clear. A Bhil suddenly appeared, as if he had sprung out of the earth.

"Stop, stop, *Maharaj*<sup>3</sup>!" he commanded. We noticed about half a dozen Bhil lads watching us from a nearby hillock. One of them exclaimed: "Hey, there's a Charan with them!"

The Bhils vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

We were walking in a single file along a narrow pathway when all of a sudden, in the far distance and in the water, we saw about 15 Bhils. Fifteen Bhils wearing only loin cloths! However would Mansingh be able to protect us from so many Bhils? All kinds of misgivings crowded my

<sup>3</sup>*Maharaj*: An honorific, sometimes added to the name of a person to show respect

mind. Two of our companions were ahead of the group, walking straight towards the Bhils, so we too felt compelled to follow them. In any case, that was where the path led us. Then I heard a voice:

"What? Is that Vegad Sahib?"

In an instant, everything became clear: these were our swimmers from Jabalpur! Govind Mishra, who lived in Jabalpur, was a keen swimmer. He had organised a group of swimming enthusiasts, who had started their epic swim from below the Bargi Dam near Jabalpur. They had a boat to transport their equipment. They would swim for a week at a time, then return home for a break, leaving the boat at whichever point they had reached. The next part of the swim would continue from that point. They had arrived at this spot by swimming that stretch of the Narmada in instalments. Wearing their swimming trunks, they had looked like Bhils from a distance. I was thrilled to see these brave young people from Jabalpur near Kasta, the most dangerous village in the wilderness. My joy knew no bounds.

Nobody had ever attempted such a long distance swim down the Narmada before. These young swimmers had to face the perils of the river as they swam—whirlpools at some places, crocodiles at others. The greatest danger arose from the treacherous rocks hidden just below the surface of the water. They also had to contend with the weather. Sometimes hailstones fell with the rain. Overcoming all these daunting odds, they had reached this far. They talked with us for a little while, and then off they went, confidently frolicking in the water so we too went on our way.

As we walked, we saw nothing but rocks in all directions. The name 'Jhari', which means 'thicket', is totally misleading: there was not a single tree to shade us from the sun. We would rest in the shadow of a tall rock. In several places there was not even a semblance of a path—we trudged over rough stones. Kakaji, with all his bulk, lost his balance a couple of times but some how saved himself from falling. Even though he walked very warily, he still could not prevent himself from falling at one point. As he rose to his feet, he quoted, laughing:

*The king falls from his horse on the battlefield*

*He who crawls on his knees—how can that toddler fall?*

Kakaji looked just like the patriarch of a family. He was jolly and

sociable. Tiwari had said, "If God will grant me old age, let me be just like Kakaji." Jagdishram and Kakaji wore shorts and T-shirts: it was as if they had become young lads again. They shared their clothes and shoes. Well, one thing they didn't share was Kakaji's set of false teeth, (which he called his 'ornaments'). There was such warmth and affection between the brothers that when one was pricked by a thorn, the other would wince.

I collected a number of pretty pebbles from Jhari, all in different natural colours. Though I was already burdened with the weight of my knapsack, I could not resist picking them up. Actually, it was not I who collected them—the child in me did.

We reached Dharmray in the evening. Only that one day's walk from Katarkhera to Dharmray had been fraught with danger, and we had got through it. We stayed the night at the headman's house in Dharmray, and were entertained by his whole family. We had only walked a little way the next morning when we came to Hiranfal. This was where the mountains gave way to the plains.

As we walked steadily on, the mountains melted into the distant skyline. While I had walked along the opposite bank 13 years ago, Hiranfal had felt like the preamble to Shulpan Jhari; now, having traversed this side, it felt like the epilogue.

As noon approached, the fiery sun blazed down. We were all suffering from the heat. Cotton-wool clouds drifted lazily in the sky. I addressed an elderly cloud: 'Brother Cloud, you are so self-sacrificing that you inundate the earth with rain while completely draining yourself. As if that is not enough, in addition to working for the common good, you also work for the benefit of individuals. I know how you helped Yaksh<sup>3</sup> when he was lonely and sad.

'You took his message to faraway Alkapuri. As you helped Yaksh in India, you also helped Moses in Egypt. When Moses was leading the children of Israel away from the bondage of slavery, from Egypt into Asia, you showed them the way. You were called a "pillar of cloud".

'O Fount of Mercy! Now give me a little help. I have just a small request: instead of wandering randomly about the sky, please position yourself beneath the sun in such a way that we get some shade. Walking

<sup>3</sup>Yaksh: The personification of a divine spirit who had been in the service of King Kubera of the Himalayan kingdom of Alkapuri. According to legend, Yaksh had been banished for a year from Alkapuri by the king as he had neglected his royal duties. Yaksh is said to have sent a message to his wife using a cloud as a messenger



under your canopy would be really wonderful. You would become famous by earning the name of 'Meghmandap' ('cloud canopy' or 'cloud umbrella').'

But my plea to the cloud was to no avail. The fault was mine. I was neither Yaksh nor Moses. Why would he listen to me?

We reached Koteswar in the evening and spent the night at the temple. There were huge *neem* trees in the temple grounds, one so enormous that it took three people with outstretched arms to encircle its trunk.

A thorn had lodged itself into Jagdishram's foot. A little team of people assembled for the operation of extracting it. One person held Jagdishram's foot, while Jagdishram himself held Kakaji's hand. Someone brought some milk and another brought pincers. A *parikramavasi* teased out the thorn. Kakaji said: "With such a team of experienced engineers on the job, how could the thorn not be removed!"

Kakaji was 18 years older than Jagdishram, but the two brothers were as close as friends of the same age. In fact, Kakaji had the ability to treat everybody as his equal, and his endearing and simple nature made him a friend to all who came to know him.

We set off again the next morning. We stayed overnight in Ekkalavara, where a simple-hearted *sadhu* resided in the temple. "I met a 900-year-old saint on a *parikrama*," he said. As I must have looked quite sceptical at the claim of such a great age, he added in all seriousness, "Some saints acquire such spiritual powers that they can take out their internal organs, wash them and put them back. By this method they can live for a thousand years." May all people have such washable internal organs!

We walked on in the morning and met a 23-year-old *sanyasi* in Semalda. "My mother was born in the Zambia, in Africa," he told us. "She was educated in England. After marriage she came to Mumbai, where I was born. I had a convent school education. Father was a well-known businessman, but I was inclined towards an ascetic life from childhood. After my mother died, I left home and set out on the Narmada *parikrama*. The quiet environment here suits me well, so I have stayed here for a year."

We reached Bara Barda by evening. There were three women pilgrims at the temple too. They cooked cornmeal *rotis* for us very cheerfully, at our request.

"We are troubling you," I apologised to them.

"Trouble? What trouble? We are used to working in the fields all day," they countered.

"Only women who work in the fields are capable of walking on a *parikrama*," commented Jagdishram. "City women can't do it."

Most pilgrims used Bara Barda as a departure point for Mandu. We did not want to leave the Narmada so we continued along the riverbank. As evening drew near we reached Dharmपुरी. We stayed the night at the Ram Temple, where there were good facilities. There were well-built fireplaces for cooking and large heaps of firewood nearby. However, the pieces of wood were too large to fit into the fireplace. We borrowed an ax from a neighbour. Jagdishram chopped the wood.

"Today you have become Parshurama<sup>4</sup>!" I joked, as he swung the ax.

Heavy rain fell at night. The following morning, I informed my companions that it was just 20 kilometres to Maheswar, but later I found out that I had miscalculated the total distance. Even if it is a small sum, I committed a mistake. How could I have known what a severe punishment was in store for me due to my mistake?

The Narmada is 1,312 kilometres in length. I was uncertain for a long time whether the distance was 1,312 or 1,213 kilometres. If the Narmada had been one kilometre longer than 1,312 kilometres, it would have been 1313 kilometres, and no doubt would have arisen.

Oh well, the Narmada missed the mark by one kilometre only!

<sup>4</sup>Parshurama: The sixth incarnation of Vishnu who undertook a severe penance to please the god Shiva, and was awarded an ax by Shiva as a reward



## 19. Dharmपुरi to Maheswar

I slept fitfully. During my bouts of wakefulness, I gazed at the stars, and I followed the journey of the moon. Once I even tried to smell the moon. I noticed that the surface of the moon looked chiselled. Perhaps some sculptor had been trying to carve out a statue. The stars looked like tiny birds. I even heard their faint chirping, but they all flew away well before dawn. The daytime sky is like the abandoned nest of those migrant birds.

It was late by the time we left Dharmपुरi. We were all set to start our walk at the usual time when someone mentioned that there was a large island in the Narmada that we should definitely have a look at, and so we did. The island, covered in lush green foliage, was indeed very attractive. Tiwari and Chhotu meanwhile had set off towards our next destination, Maheswar, ahead of us.

The sky was cloudy, and there was a possibility of rain, but we kept going. We had walked for a few hours when it began to drizzle. We continued walking on a path that was completely sodden. We then went onto a road that led to Maheswar. On the way, Mansingh told us an amazing story:

"A man was travelling on camel-back; his companions were some way behind him. He stopped to rest under a tree and tied the camel's rope to his ankle so that it would not wander away into the forest. He had not slept for two nights so he soon fell into a deep slumber. A python came along and swallowed him whole. Then, just as it was about to coil itself around a tree, the man's companions arrived. They saw the camel's rope dangling out of the python's mouth and realised what had happened. They cut open the python's belly with a knife and took out their companion who was still in one piece. The amazing thing was that his sleep had not been disturbed; he was still fast asleep! The companions agreed between themselves that they should not tell him what had happened, but several months later somebody did tell him. He died about a fortnight later. I heard this story from my grandfather."

We had met his grandfather in Katarkhera.

After 10 kilometres we reached Khalghat. Here we discovered that Maheswar was another 20 kilometres away, which made it 30 kilometres from Dharmपुरi. I had told everyone that the distance from Dharmपुरi to Maheswar was 20 kilometres as I had forgotten to add the distance from Khalghat to Dhamnod. That was how the confusion arose. Tiwari and Chhotu had already gone ahead. I felt they might not yet have got as far as Maheswar. So we sent Mansingh and one of the other young men, Govind, with our luggage onward to Dhamnod, hoping that if they walked fast enough they would be sure to catch up with Tiwari and Chhotu and make them halt at Dhamnod. The rest of us went to bathe at the *ghat* near the old bridge at Khalghat.

Jagdishram always took good care of Kakaji. At 75, Kakaji could match our pace while walking but at the end of the day, age would take its toll. As night approached, he would become languid with fatigue. Then Jagdishram would massage his arms and legs for a long time, vigorously rubbing the soles of his feet. He would massage Kakaji with oil or apply acupressure. "Go to sleep, go to sleep!" Kakaji would murmur in protest, but Jagdishram would ignore his elder brother's entreaties and continue treating him for hours.

"I'm getting him ready for tomorrow," Jagdishram said to me, "just like a groom gets a horse ready." So Kakaji was like the old horse in the herd! Still, we couldn't resist being envious of his otherwise remarkable

youthfulness. His hearty cheer became a little muted only on one day, when he had fallen heavily while jumping over a stream.

Jagdishram had begun to massage Kakaji on the *ghat* itself. As he intended to give Kakaji a second round of massage after an hour and a half, Hemraj, the other boy who had come with Mansingh, and I went ahead towards Dhamnod. The two brothers would follow us later. So that was how our group had come to be split up into pairs that day: Tiwari and Chhotu; Mansingh and Govind; Hemraj and I; Jagdishram and Kakaji.

Hemraj and I reached Dhamnod but there was no sign of Tiwari and Chhotu, nor of Mansingh and Govind. All our luggage was with them. It was getting dark. After quite some time, Jagdishram and Kakaji also arrived. They too were surprised at the absence of the other four. We arranged to stay at the Hanuman Hut, after which I set out once again with Hemraj in search of our companions. We could not locate them. We had already walked 20 kilometres that day, and if we could have walked eight kilometres more, we would have reached Maheswar.

It had turned cold after that morning's rain and we did not have even a sheet with us. How would we get through the night? So far we had been given neither mattresses nor blankets at any *dharmshala* along the way. So it was nothing less than a coincidence to find that both mattresses and quilts were available at the Hanuman Hut at Dhamnod! I felt as if someone was watching over us and taking care of us when we most needed it.

We set off for Maheswar the following morning and had just arrived when we saw Chhotu coming towards us. He was coming to take us. Our four companions had reached Maheswar the previous night. Tiwari and Chhotu had veered off the road at Khalghat, opting to take a pathway to reach Maheswar which bypassed Dhamnod altogether. As we had reached Dhamnod late, Mansingh and Govind had assumed that perhaps we had also gone directly to Maheswar, so they too went on to Maheswar. Not finding us there, they had returned to Dhamnod, carrying the bedding we would need for the night. While we had been searching for them in Dhamnod, they had been looking for us! Not having found us, they decided to go back to Maheswar. It was a Comedy of Errors—Dhamnod style!

I was sorry that all this had happened due to my error in calculating the distance to Maheswar. Finally, all of us were able to reunite at Maheswar.

"We would like to go back home now," announced Mansingh. At Kakaji's request, Jagdishram calculated the bill and settled the amount due to them. Had they not been with us, we would have been easy prey for the Bhils. I slipped an extra 500 rupees to Mansingh. "From me," I told him.

Mansingh refused to take the extra money. "No, keep it," he said. "We have received our payment."

"You must take it," I pressed him. "I am giving it very wholeheartedly. Because of you we have emerged from the most dangerous area of the wilderness safe and sound. I will write about all this in my book. Your names will be mentioned too."

"Do you have a copy of your earlier book with you?" he asked.

The second edition of my book in Gujarati, *Parikrama of Mother Narmada*, had just been printed. Thakar had given me a copy of it at Vadodara. I showed it to Mansingh, specially the chapter about the south bank of Shulpan Jhari.

"Will you give me this book?" he requested.

I hesitated. It was the first copy of the second edition. I had wanted to take it home with me. I also wondered whether Mansingh was capable of appreciating it.

"Can you read Gujarati?" I asked him.

"Yes."

He read a few lines aloud at random. Then he said: "Your book will keep us in contact with our Gujarati language."

All doubt fled from my mind. I happily gifted him the book. We also exchanged addresses. Mansingh left, quite content.

The Charan families of Katarkhera village in Shulpan Jhari would now have a chance to read my book now and then, and keep up the connection with the mother tongue. What greater value could my book indeed have had? It had been a truly gratifying experience to gift the book for such a good purpose.

Where else had the human touch enhanced the beauty of the Narmada more than at Maheswar? The waterfront constructed by Queen Ahilyabai<sup>1</sup> was overwhelming in its splendour. These *ghats* looked as

<sup>1</sup>Ahilyabai: Queen Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) ascended the throne of the erstwhile kingdom of Malwa (of which Maheswar was the capital) following the deaths of her husband and father-in-law. She built several temples and *dharamsalas*, both in and beyond her kingdom

fresh, as fine, and as superb as if they were a perfect work of art.

There was a two-storey building which was as elegant as a palace having many balconies, from where one could watch the riverside scene. There was a magnificent flight of steps leading down to the river from an imposing gateway at the centre. It was a glorious *ghat* with a large temple, Queen Ahilyabai's modest residence, and memorials to kings long deceased all co-existing in extraordinary harmony.

The view of the Narmada at Maheswar was very expansive and the entire waterfront bustled with life. The boats wandering up and down the river enhanced the Narmada's elegance. It was the third day since our arrival; that night would showcase the full moon of the month of *Kartik*. The crowds had been gathering since the previous day. A number of people slept on the *ghats*. The crowd generated a joyful hustle and bustle; the clusters of bathers, including colourfully-dressed women, grew steadily. Several devout men stood in the river loudly declaiming Sanskrit verses. Young men had swum far out. After their holy dip, the devotees went to see the temples and the fort. Vibrations of faith and joy pervaded the atmosphere.

A few men came up from the *ghat*, one of them saying:

"Great God Shiva, I pray to thee,  
Give silver to others, give gold to me!"

Babulal Sen, an eminent literary figure and a very religious-minded gentleman, had arranged a gathering at which I narrated a few stories about my Narmada walk. A month-old beard had grown on my face and my clothes were far from clean. I felt embarrassed to be addressing the gathering with such a scruffy appearance, but the warm hearts of the audience soon put me at ease.

Maheswar, the former capital of the Holkar kingdom, is a historic city. Queen Ahilyabai had been widowed young, and the entire burden of governance fell upon her. She ruled very astutely. Shunning luxury, she maintained a very frugal lifestyle. She was a loving mother to her subjects. In her time there were more than a thousand weaving looms at Maheswar. Now there were only a few left. We watched with interest as the exquisite Maheswari saris were being handwoven on looms in a huge hall.

Night fell. As the darkness deepened, the crowd of men and women offering worship to the Narmada, with small oil-filled lamps, swelled. How beautifully the floating lights decorated the surface of the water! Some devotees offered their lights from boats in mid-river. On the opposite bank too all one could see were lights, lights and more lights. The river was strewn with hundreds of little beads of light.

There is motion in river-lights The river lights could well say to the house lights: "Look how mobile, how progressive we are! You are confined to one place. You can't even move an inch. You are tied to one place only. You conservatives!"

The house lights could retort: "Why are you taking false credit? Is the motion yours or that of the river? It is the river carrying you fellows along! Just get out of the current and you'll see."

Such would be the friendly banter between colleagues.

At first the *Kartik* full moon was obscured by clouds, but later the clouds drifted away and the moon shone all the brighter in the dark velvet sky. The Narmada looked even lovelier bathed in the silver moonlight. I kept switching my gaze, glancing at the broad clear expanse of Narmada and then up at the moon at the peak of its glory, and back at the river again.

I fancied that the first week of the 'bright fortnight' was the *brahmacharyashram* or the 'student stage' of the moon's life; the second week was its *grihsthashram* or 'householder stage'. Upon arriving at the zenith of its opulence, the moon's inclination would be towards detachment. The third week was the moon's stage of *vanaprasthashram* or 'homeless wandering' and the fourth week was *sanyastashram* or 'renunciation'. The sun on the other hand has but one endless state—the student stage. Perhaps that is why he is always so fiery.

How pleasant the 'bright fortnight' is for village people and how very inconvenient the 'dark fortnight'! Why haven't we invented a technique to collect the abundant moonlight of the 'bright fortnight' to counteract the darkness of the 'dark fortnight'? How about making a reservoir in which moonlight could be stored until it is full? How about bars of moonlight for sale in the market?

As the moon prepared to depart in the early hours of the morning, some of the stars came to see it off.

When I left home, Sharad, my son had mentioned that STD<sup>2</sup> phone facilities were now available everywhere; I would be able to phone home every few days. However I could not have done anything so extravagant. It was against my principles. Well, I reasoned, I had written a few postcards. 'I'll phone home from here in Maheswar.' I thought. 'A month has gone by. I'll give them all the news briefly. I'll also get all the news from home. It shouldn't cost more than a dozen rupees or so.'

Luckily my wife Kanta answered the phone herself.

"We've crossed Shulpan Jhari," I told her. "My health is fine. I'll reach Omkareswar in a week. Is everything all right at home?"

"Yes."

"Shall I put the phone down?" I asked.

"Wait, talk to your brother Jawahar."

My eyes were glued to the meter which was rising steadily: 15 . . . 16

. . .

I had finished talking with my younger brother. He said, "Here, talk to Sharad." The meter read:

18 . . . 20 . . .

Sharad said, "Talk to Archana." Archana said, "Talk to Rekha." Rekha said, "Talk to Leena."

The meter was going wild: 30 . . . 31 . . .

I spoke with my granddaughter Neha too. There were still some more members of the family left. I was just about to hang up the phone when Kanta came on again: "Take milk every day; take care of your health. Don't walk too much. If you feel tired, come home."

I could feel the panic rising: 35 . . . 36 . . .

Suddenly, I had a flash. When my daughters-in-law went home to visit their parents, they would freely phone their husbands. My sons too would phone their wives without clock-watching. Kanta and I had never talked on the phone to each other like that. This was the first time we were doing so in our whole lives. I stopped looking at the meter.

"Has Kaniska started walking?" I asked about my little granddaughter.

"No, but she'll learn in a few days. When will you be back?" asked Kanta.

"In a week's time."

"Good, but be careful of your health," she reminded me again.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. "You are going for your morning walks regularly, aren't you?"

We talked a little longer. It didn't matter what we were saying anymore; we were listening to each other and being caressed by each other's voices. Our dialogue was like classical music, in which the voice is important, not the words.

The phone bill came to Rs. 39. Mother Narmada would forgive me for a bill of Rs. 39 for a STD call made in 43 years of married life.

<sup>2</sup>STD: The acronym for Subscriber Trunk Dialling, the facility for long-distance calls



## 20. Maheswar to Chaubis Avtar (Omkareshwar)

I walked along the bank of the Narmada by day and along the bank of the Ganga by night—the *Aakashganga* or the Ganga of the sky, also known as the Milky Way. Walking in the night sky is like stepping into a sacred forest to gather spiritual strength and to awaken the faith within. One could blend oneself into this infinity by merging with the night sky. Looking at the sheer beauty of the immense dark canopy leaves me spell-bound.

Yet, there may be people who wonder, 'Are these innumerable planets and stars of any use? What are they for? Who needs them all?'

Such people may go on to argue: 'The sun is necessary. The earth would not exist without it: it is the life-giver. The earth is our home. The moon has its uses too, but apart from these three, why do the billions and trillions of stars exist? They are of no use at all. What difference would it make to us if they ceased to exist tomorrow? What a terrible waste of the Creator's power and resources to have made all of them.'

'In all Creation, only that which fulfils the needs of human beings has some significance. Everything else is meaningless! Anything that

exists should be useful to me, for my use and pleasure. It is I who should enjoy and consume it. Me, myself and I!

Those who think along such lines may well regard the sky as a great graveyard and the stars as tiny graves, meaningless and useless. Such people must certainly be made of stone: they are people who have no heart. In its place is a cold calculator, constantly computing profit and loss; incessantly listing the useful and the useless. Words such as 'love', 'creation', 'charity', 'simplicity' and 'beauty' are absent from their vocabulary. Such people live in a world deprived of beauty. God himself must regret giving them life.

The myriad little flickering lamps that were set afloat on the river the previous night seemed to be replica of the twinkling stars in the sky. What a crowd there had been on the night of *Kartik Purnima*! Today, though, all those people have returned home or be setting off to do so. The time had come for us too to go our separate ways. After a whole fortnight together, Jagdishram and Kakaji had already left to return home. Jogesh Thakar had come from Ahmedabad to photograph the *ghats*. He too had gone. Tiwari, Chhotu and I were a trio again. And now it was time for us to leave Maheswar too.

The weather had changed. The sun no longer beat down on us as mercilessly as before. For the past two days, in fact, the touch of the sun had been a caress.

After a little while we came to Mandaleswar. A large bridge and a dam were under construction nearby, but work on both had stopped. The next place was Jalud, from where the water of the Narmada is taken to Indore. A Hanuman Hut had been made for pilgrims in the village, but we were keen to stay on the bank of Narmada. We went to a *sadhu's* hut which was on the riverside. It was a fine hut set in a flower garden. The *baba* happened to come out just then. Upon hearing our request, he said: "I am engaged in solitary religious practice here. I do not wish to give or take anything from the world."

"Nobody else can stay here." Having said this very firmly, he went back into his hut. A faint antagonism towards him arose in me momentarily, but I checked it at once. This was not a *dharmshala*: it was his private hut. We had no right to disturb his solitude. We returned to the Hanuman Hut.

In the morning we followed a track through fields of cotton and sugarcane. We stayed that night in Bahegaon. The following morning we walked on a path that ran alongside the river. The bray of a donkey came from afar. I did not know whether it was singing cheerfully or lamenting its fate. Perhaps the beginning was joyful but the end, melancholy.

We had sat down to rest at the temple in Dharieswar when we heard the sharp report of a gun. The priest explained that a corpse was getting a right royal send-off down on the riverbank. Further upstream the water was somewhat brackish. "It's a stretch of sea water here," explained a villager. We bathed there, enjoying the sea water.

Sand was being extracted from the bed of the Narmada in many places. The sand-extractors took their boats mid-stream and plunging into the water with their baskets dredged up the sand, filled their boat with it and brought it ashore to the trucks waiting on the beach. Sand is a by-product of the river.

We reached Semarla in the shadow of the evening. We had walked 20 kilometres that day and were exhausted. Sleep came quickly. In the twinkling of an eye, or so it seemed, it was morning. We left at the crack of dawn and reached Kherighat by mid-day. Two bridges could be seen from afar: a road bridge and a railway bridge. The latter was the first rail bridge since the one at Bharuch and that too for metre gauge trains. A new and higher road bridge was under construction.

We found a ready meal at Virakt Kuti, a very large *ashram*.

That evening, we reached the Dagdu *ashram* at Charukeswar. There we saw a group of about eight pilgrims. There were good facilities for lodging and food and a beautiful shrine for worship. I saw an elderly resident of the *ashram* approaching me with two postcards in his hand. He was looking for someone who had come from the nearby town of Barwah, who could mail his postcards. In response to his question, I told him that we were on a pilgrimage and that we lived in Jabalpur.

"Aren't you Amritlal Vegad?" he asked.

It was a pleasant surprise to be called by my name in remote Charukeswar. The elderly resident turned out to be a relative of mine. I had once gone to Gwarighat, which is near Jabalpur, to meet him when he was on pilgrimage. He had lived a life of renunciation for about 30 years and lived at Charukeswar now. His name was Brijvasi.

"What a coincidence!" I exclaimed. I was very pleased to meet him. At his request, the chief priest invited me to give a talk after the evening worship. It was the first time I would be speaking in an *ashram* in front of other pilgrims. I spoke very informally, almost as if I was conversing with myself.

Kanta's article *My Husband* had been published, and Brijvasi had read it with great enjoyment. It concluded like this:

"Nobody knows when death will come. We do not know which of the two of us will go first. I would like to be the first to go, on the principle of 'ladies first'. Every Indian woman wishes to die in her married state, rather than as a widow. He says, how would death dare to take you away while I am alive? Well, this is jokingly said, but this I have resolved: in my next life—and in every life thereafter—my address would be: 'Kanta Vegad, c/o Amritlal Vegad'."

Brijvasi was very moved when he read this. He recounted an incident which had taken place in his village. An aged couple lived apart from their sons' families. The sons were very good and wished to do their very best for their parents, yet the elderly couple preferred to live separately. They sang devotional songs to God and were at peace. A group of hymn-singers would gather at their home every day. One day, during the hymn-singing session which was being held in the courtyard, the old man suddenly shouted: "I am going!" At the same time, a voice came from the kitchen indoors: "I am coming!" Outside in the courtyard the old man expired; inside, the old lady too had breathed her last. Both were laid together on a single funeral pyre.

I was very moved when I heard this story. Brijvasi had traded tears for tears.

The crackling voice of winter had been making itself heard for the past few days; that day it increased suddenly. In the inner recesses of the temple grounds stood a beautiful banyan tree, with its generous shade and numerous aerial roots. That banyan had the shape of the sanctum of a temple.

Most pilgrims went from Charukeswar to Barwah, which was two kilometres away, and from Barwah by road to Chaubis Avtar, but we were



reluctant to leave the bank of Narmada. We were informed that the way ahead would be rough and risky but we were determined to walk along the riverside all the same. Crossing the Choral river, we walked on. The path seemed easy enough at first, but afterwards it became hard going: the rock-face was steep and the river was in full flow just below us. One little slip and we could tumble straight into the water. We crept along as carefully as cats. In a couple of places the gap between the rocks was so narrow that we had to literally squeeze our way through.

The terrain in that area was very mountainous. The Narmada looked magnificent against the backdrop of the stately mountains. It was as if she was nestled in a cradle of mountains. That area was completely cut off from the world, and extremely beautiful in its secretive seclusion. At one point, we were forced to leave the riverbank to cross over a hill; this was where the teak forest began. It was a hard task to first climb up and then clamber down a steep path of loose stones. After descending the hill we arrived at Kothawa, which was at the confluence of the Narmada and the Kaveri. Actually the Kaveri was a branch of Narmada. We took our holy dip at that confluence of the two rivers.

Omkareshwar was visible from here, but is on the south bank of Narmada; while we were walking along the north bank we wanted to go to Chaubis Avtar. From there we had to turn away from the riverbank and delve into a thick forest. A few days earlier, thousands of devotees had done a miniature Narmada pilgrimage—a *Panchkaushi Yatra* or 5 day walk along the same route. The mountain pathway had been marked with white daubs of paint on either side as a guide. We would certainly have lost our way in that forest had those white marks not been there.

The Narmada is so beautiful between Charukeswar and Chaubis Avtar that memories of Shulpan Jhari kept coming back to me.

We reached Chaubis Avtar in the afternoon. The somewhat ramshackle *dharmshala* we had stayed at in the previous year had been rebuilt and now looked more solid and durable. A well-built hut had also come up nearby, where a foreign *sadhu* named Narmada Shankar resided. With a tuft of hair, Hindu-style, and a *lungi* wrapped over his loincloth, he looked like a typical *sanyasi*. That day was Monday, his day of silence. A young foreign couple had come to meet him, but the *sadhu* would neither speak nor write that day, so after sitting there for a little while the couple left.

The next morning we had the opportunity to get to know him. He was Austrian, and his language was German. He now spoke fluent Hindi. He had lived on the bank of Narmada for 14 years. After all those years in sunny India, his body had developed a copper tan. He had completed the Narmada *parikrama*. His hut was clean and attractive, and decorated with pictures of Adi Shankaracharya, Ramakrishna Paramhans and Swami Vivekananda. He also displayed a picture of Mother Narmada riding on her crocodile. Outside the hut was a small pit for a sacred fire. It was at that spot where we sat and conversed.

"Money is necessary to go on a pilgrimage to the four holy places<sup>1</sup>," he pointed out. "There is no need for money for the Narmada *parikrama*. Even the poorest of the poor can do it. And the clearest water and freshest air is only on the banks of the Narmada," he said.

When the subject of Shulpan Jhari came up, he said, "When I came out of the Jhari, I felt as if all my sins had been washed away. There is such terrible poverty there! Pilgrims come to Omkareshwar after their *parikrama* to offer water and hold a ritual feast. The feast should not take place here; it should be held in the Jhari. One day I will make a meal of *halwa*<sup>2</sup>, *puri*<sup>3</sup> and *kheer* for the Bhils. They may not even have ever seen such food. And it would not be all that expensive. Five thousand rupees at the most."

However, the situation at Shulpan Jhari had altered drastically. Three-quarters of the Bhils had been relocated to Gujarat. Incidents of robbery had as a result become less frequent.

"We are going home now," I informed the foreign *sadhu*.

"Oh *Maharaj*, what will you do at home? Stay here," he urged.

"Even when I go home, I continue doing the Narmada's work," I told him. "The Narmada gives me heaps of homework to do. I'll be writing up an account of this journey we are now on, in Hindi as well as in Gujarati. That will take quite a long time. I will also create collages (paintings) from the sketches I have made, and from memory too. Even at home," I reiterated, "I work for the Narmada."

<sup>1</sup>four holy places: These refer to the most sacred sites for Hindus located at the four 'corners' of India. They are (1) The temple of Lord Vishnu in Badrinath, Uttarakhand, in the north; (2) The temple of Lord Krishna in Dwarka, Gujarat, in the west; (3) The temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri, Orissa (now Odisha), in the east and (4) the temple of Lord Shiva in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, in the south

<sup>2</sup>*halwa*: An Indian sweet

<sup>3</sup>*puri*: Unleavened, deep-fried Indian bread

I consider myself to be both Arjun and Eklavya<sup>4</sup> for the Narmada. Perhaps less Arjun and more Eklavya. I offer the Narmada my deep respect even from far away.

We crossed the river to reach Omkareswar by boat.

The Narmada had several islands but none displayed a more glorious halo than the sacred Omkareswar, an island-hill set in the middle of the river. It is ritually circumambulated; we too paid our respects by walking around it. The route was beautiful. We saw three foreign girls walking ahead of us. When they came across the monkeys that lived on the island, they stood still, frozen by fear.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," I reassured them.

"Big teeth!" one of them responded. As we walked on, they joined us.

"Which country do you come from?" I asked.

"From Austria," they replied.

"Really? A man from your country has become an ascetic and lives at Chaubis Avtar."

"We met him only yesterday," they informed me.

We met other tourists from Austria.

We soon came to the confluence, the Kaveri Sangam. Then we climbed up the hill. In the 13th century, Omkareswar had been a large town; the entrance gateways of the fortress and the ruins of some temples were still there. Whatever there was on the island of Omkareshwar, it is on southern bank of the island: the temples, *ghats*, lanes, shops, *ashrams*. There was nothing at all on the northern bank.

We stayed the night in a *dharmshala*. We planned to leave for Jabalpur at 10 o'clock the next morning. Each day I had been bathing after noon because of the cold, but on that last day I had to bathe earlier. We went down to the main *ghat* through narrow alleys, looking at the attractive shop displays. Tiwari and Chhotu immediately plunged into the water. Then it was my turn. They both looked at me sympathetically.

I summoned up my courage, tightly squeezed my eyes shut and declared: "Cold, I refuse to accept you." That day, I defeated the cold for a short time though.

<sup>4</sup>Eklavya: A prince from a jungle tribe who is a character in the *Mahabharata*. Rejected as a student by the master archer Drona on account of his low caste, Eklavya erected a statue of Drona and treated it like his *guru*, practicing and mastering his archery in its presence

We had completed the current stretch of the walk with a dip in the Narmada. We had enjoyed *Sharad Purnima* at Nareswar, *Diwali* at Hapeswar and *Kartik Purnima* at Maheswar. I had walked 400 kilometres at the age of 71. I had never walked such a long distance before.

I reached home that night. There was five weeks' growth of beard on my face. My body had become emaciated. Tiny Kanistha could not recognise me. Most members of my family had gathered at home, including my three daughters-in-law.

"You go to your mother's home, don't you?" I said to them. "So did I. I went to visit my Mother. That's where I have come from!"



## 21. Jhansighat to Bheraghat

There was a joyous atmosphere at home, enlivened by our guests creating a hustle and bustle, noise and excitement. The day had just dawned. I was about to embark on my final walk along the Narmada. Twenty-seven people had gathered at my house to walk the last stretch with me. This was a new family, unusual and distinct from my blood-family. The Narmada was the invisible cord that bound us all together.

As we left the house, my granddaughter Neha ritually placed a holy pot on her head and wished us all—*Shubhaste Panthan:*, a happy journey.

My earlier walks along the north bank of the Narmada had not followed a geographical sequence. I had walked the nearer stretches of the route first, followed by the farther stretches. And now, to our joy, the final phase was about to begin. This would be comparatively a very short walk, only 50 kilometres long, from Jhansighat to Gwarighat at Jabalpur. The distance was short, but the group was far larger than any I had travelled with previously. Never had such a diverse crew walked together before!

Scott was from America and his wife Morag was British. They were a very lovable couple. They had both visited India several times. Morag

wore a *salwar-kurti*<sup>1</sup>. Both were 32 years old and had taught English in Hong Kong. After saving up enough money, they had left their jobs and bought a second-hand rubber dinghy for Rs 1,25,000. A new craft would have cost them more than Rs 2,00,000.

After voyaging down the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Mahanadi rivers, they had paddled their dinghy down the Narmada from Mandla to Bharuch, stopping for a week at Jabalpur on the way. They had expressed their desire to participate in my walk. This young couple had come from far away to travel some 4,500 kilometres down the rivers of India. Now their dinghy had been folded up like a bedroll and stored at a friend's house. A river, a boat and complete solitude: what more could young lovers ask for!

On one of our earlier walks we had stayed overnight at the Sunaharibhan Ashram at Kiti. Coincidentally, Scott and Morag had also stayed there. They had mentioned my final walk to the *swami* there, Swami Gopalswarup Tirth, so he too decided to join us. He was a *Dandi swami*, who had been to America and spoke English fluently. He readily attracted attention because of his flowing saffron robes.

Seventy-five-year-old Sarayukant Jha had come from Raipur. He too looked very striking with his fair complexion and tall, well-built frame. He was a Sanskrit scholar and a writer in Hindi. I had rarely met such a witty person, a man with 'spontaneous replies.' He laughed so wholeheartedly that he became laughter incarnate.

Major General (Retd) Premdas Sharma came from Delhi. We had been classmates at school. He had headed the Pachmarhi Military Academy. Then he was posted in Delhi as a director. He had been to Korea while in service, and two years ago, had toured Europe and America with his wife. At the time of joining my walk, he was promoting and marketing a magical formula that professed to be an elixir of youth for aged people. Originally this formula had been discovered by the *lamas*<sup>2</sup> of Tibet.

Jagdishram, the caregiver who had joined me on my previous walk for two weeks also came along this time. Also with us was the fair-skinned Ranjit Dasgupta. Our family contributed eight members to our group. They were my brother Nanabhai from Bhilai; my sister Mridula from Gondiya; my youngest sister Bhagirathi and her son Vijay; my younger

<sup>1</sup>*salwar-kurti*: A two-piece Indian outfit comprising a short tunic worn over loose trousers shaped like harem pants

<sup>2</sup>*lamas*: Tibetan Buddhist monks, usually the high priests

brother Jawahar's wife Nita and my wife Kanta. Also accompanying us was Kanta's friend Vijaya Muley, who had memorised the entire *Bhagwad Gita*<sup>3</sup>. Dr Kusum Solanki, an allopathic doctor who had a keen interest in naturopathy joined us as well. She wore the doctor's traditional white coat on the walk.

Pinki, the youngest member of our group, entertained us with her ready laughter and merriment. One more couple plus other people added to our numbers. Chhotu and two other helpers were also part of our group. Chhotu was indispensable for our journey.

It was perhaps a little rash to take along so many people, including 10 ladies, on the walk. It surprised me where my courage came from. If one decides to undertake something worthwhile, perhaps the courage to fulfill it follows.

We all arrived at Jhansighat by bus at nine o'clock. There we sprinkled some Narmada water on our foreheads, sipped a little water and splashed some to cool our eyes. Then we set off along the riverside path. The date was March 29, 1999.

The *Dandi swami* led the group. We walked in a single file along a path that led through vegetable crops that had been planted in the rich mud deposited by floods along the water's edge. It was the first time that most of the women had had a chance to be free of their household chores and walk close to nature. Their joy was overwhelming.

The sun was very strong. When we face the sun, it seems hotter than when it shines at our backs. The difference between facing the sun and having it behind us is similar to the difference between swimming with the current and against the current. The river of life is exactly the same. After the age of 65 or 70, life becomes an upstream swim. (And yes, life hands out two challans : one for happiness and the other for sorrow. We must welcome these wishes from life too).

We stopped to rest at a temple with a small dharmshala beside it. We stopped to rest at a temple with a small *dharmshala* beside it. Here, one more person, Shailendra, joined us. Our walk had been reported in the local paper. He had read it and decided to join us. Soon, he became a part of our team.

<sup>3</sup>*Bhagwad Gita*: Also referred to as the *Gita*, it is a 700-verse scripture recording the philosophical and theological discourse by Lord Krishna to the Pandava warrior prince *Arjuna*. The *Gita* forms a major part of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharat*. It is revered as the holy book of the Hindus

The mid-day hours lapsed into dreary silence. Not so much as the chirp of a bird could be heard. Then we saw that one of the women in the group was massaging her husband's legs. The *Dandi swami*, clearly disapproving, said: "This is wrong. There is no husband, there is no wife on a pilgrimage. All are pilgrims. It is wrong to ask for the usual services." What he said seemed correct to me. Just then, the husband who was being massaged began to moan and groan. He had developed severe cramps in the veins of his leg which seemed to be terribly painful. His moaning upset everyone. We were at a loss, wondering what to do.

Premdas, like a professional doctor, took charge of the situation. He pulled out a box of homoeopathic medicines out of his bag and took out about a dozen vials. "Well, I have some medicine," he said, "but I haven't the faintest idea how to use it. Will someone who knows give him the right medicine?"

I suppressed my laughter. It was like saying: "I have a dictionary. Will someone please use it to write a poem?"

Pinki had a slight acquaintance with homoeopathy. She began to look through the medicines. Meanwhile, Premdas took out some cream (which we later found out was face cream) and got someone to massage the afflicted leg with it. "Not one bottle of medicine has any label on it!" exclaimed Pinki. "Be quiet!" Premdas hushed her. Then, picking up a bottle at random, he took out about 10 pills and gave them to the weeping and wailing man, saying reassuringly: "You will be fine, absolutely fine. Relax! Relax!"

Dr Kusum Solanki had some knowledge of acupressure. She began to press all the trigger points on his leg. Premdas kept repeating: "You are getting well. Gradually you will get well. Relax!" He sounded as though he were reciting a *mantra*<sup>4</sup>.

And the amazing thing was—after a little while the afflicted man did get better. Whether it was the sugar pills, the face cream, the acupressure or Premdas' magic that worked, I didn't quite know!

While travelling with a big group has its drawbacks, it also has its advantages. However difficult a problem, there would be someone in the group who would know how to solve it.

A video team from City Cable TV based in nearby Narsinghpur arrived in search of us. They had left their vehicle at the nearest village

<sup>4</sup>*mantra*: A sacred verbal formula repeated several times as an incantation, an invocation, a prayer or as a form of meditation to achieve mystical results

and reached us on foot. After they completed their recording, they were about to leave when, at our request, the couple went along with them. The husband was able to walk again, but we felt he should not strain himself. They could get a lift as far as the village square from where they could board a bus to go back home.

Meanwhile, a young *parikramavasi* had come by. He greeted us and asked me: "Are you Amritlal Vegad?" I was surprised. He continued: "I realised that you are Mr Vegad when I saw you. I have read your book in Gujarati. There's a sketch of you reproduced in it. I recognised you from that. I found your address and was on my way to visit you at home. It's great to meet you here on the bank of the Narmada."

The *parikramavasi*'s name was Nirvankrishna; he had done his Master of Arts in philosophy at the M S University in Vadodara. Atmakrishna, whom we had previously met at Nareswar, was his *gurubhai*. As he was in a hurry to reach Amarkantak, he soon went on his way. (Much later, he visited us at home with another *gurubhai*.)

It was time to move on. Around four o'clock in the afternoon we reached Malkachar, a rather pretty village situated on a steep and lofty cliff above the Narmada. At first we thought of staying there, but as the end of the day was still quite a long time away, we pressed on, not yet knowing where we would be stopping for the night. So far the path had been easy, but somewhere along the way we came across such a steep slope that it was hard to descend and easy to fall. Somehow we scrambled down. Sarayukant and Premdas waited at the top. Because of his burly frame and a knee problem, Sarayukant would lag behind like a delayed traveller. I was worried, wondering how he would be able to climb down, but he found a smarter method than the rest of us. He took a longer but easier route and came down effortlessly.

Night was beginning to fall, so we made camp on the platform outside the temple at Jilherighat. Our two assistants, assuming that we would be stopping further on, had already gone on ahead. They were carrying the food bags; now all we had left with us was only rice. In spite of bringing along plenty of provisions, we were now paupers where our meal was concerned.

Women somehow know how to overcome every difficulty. Adding some potatoes to the rice and flavouring it with ghee, they made such a

delicious *pulao*<sup>5</sup> that everyone loved it from the first mouthful, and ate it up eagerly. The praise for the impromptu dish was unanimous.

The real problem came at night. The small verandah could only accommodate a limited number of people, so only half the number of women could sleep there. The rest had to sleep out in the open on the platform in front of the temple. The day had been burning hot but after midnight it became bitterly cold. Most of us shivered all through the night. A fire was kept burning outside a *sadhu*'s hut a little way away. In turn, all the members of the group went there to warm themselves up. The *Dandi swami* stayed awake all night. If the others had managed only a fitful sleep, he had none at all.

When I woke up the next morning, I realised that there was an empty *dharmshala*, clean and tidy, just next to us! There would have been plenty of room in it for all of us, but in the dark nobody had noticed it. I had noticed the structure but had mistaken it for a private residence. Everyone had shivered all night long because of my little mistake.

Our next halt was at Bheraghat. When setting out earlier in the morning, Scott had said: "We have to go back to Jabalpur to buy some film, so the two of us will walk ahead quickly to Bheraghat. We'll come back in the evening."

We came to Siddhghat further on and found our two assistants waiting there at the temple.

The path from there to Bheraghat was quite difficult. As we crossed a ditch at one point, Mridula suddenly cried out: "Bhagirathi! Look there, look quickly!"

Bhagirathi was bewildered, not knowing what had happened. Then she saw that Nanabhai had fallen into the ditch. His clothes were covered in mud. Mridula had already crossed the ditch. She had guessed at the time that someone or other was bound to fall into it and had sat down on the far bank to keep watch, so that if anyone did fall, she could quickly alert the others and call for help.

"It's fun to watch when someone falls in!" she said, making light of the mishap. "When he scrambles out and carries on as if nothing had happened, there's nothing to watch." We all laughed at Mridula's mischievous remark, and even Nanabhai himself could not help laughing.

Meanwhile, Kusum had developed an upset stomach. Dasgupta

<sup>5</sup>pulao: A rice preparation flavoured with a variety of ingredients

asked Chhotu to pick two *bael* fruits. They were unripe, so he roasted them on a fire and gave them to Kusum to eat. A *sadhu*, noticing this, gave Kusum a large ripe *bael* fruit instead. Kusum nibbled at it as she walked along. Her stomach was fine by the evening.

While Lord Shiva is fond of *bael*, or *bael* leaves, his son Ganesh loves *laddoos*. Fruit for the father and sweets for the son. A generation gap! Oh well, both the *bael* fruit and the *laddoos* are spherical in shape. The earth, the moon, the sun and all the planets are spherical too. Why were they only spherical, I wondered, and not triangular, or square or any other shape? Why were they all round? The sphere seemed to be the primal shape, the 'mother form', from the beginning of creation. All the other shapes developed later. Perhaps they all had their origins in the sphere.

The way was long and the sun was baking hot. There was not the least breath of wind. How would Sarayukant negotiate this difficult path? Walking was hard enough for him in normal circumstances; the path we now had to take was frequently obstructed with thorny bushes. Jagdishram had massaged Sarayukant's legs for a long time the previous night. Today, while assisting him again, Jagdishram had injured his own knees, so walking had become arduous for him too. They had both lagged far behind, though not so far back that we needed to send a search party back to find them.

Arriving at Saraswatighat (Bheraghat) at dusk, we were nonplussed to see Sarayukant sitting on a wooden bed, being shaved by a barber! He, whom we had left the furthest behind, had arrived first of all! Did he have a magic carpet?

No, it was no magic carpet but a magic truck. When Sarayukant and Jagdishram realised that they could not manage the walk, they took a lift as far as Chauraha in a passing truck that had been transporting sand from the river. From Chauraha, Jagdishram had returned to Jabalpur in one tempo while Sarayukant had reached Saraswatighat in another. While we had all wilted in the terrible heat, there was Sarayukant looking as fresh as a daisy!

We had reached the point of the confluence of the Bainganga and the Narmada. The Bainganga is only a little river but it has a very wide bed. Actually, it had been a part of the original course of the Narmada. Pilgrims call it 'Old Narmada' and do not cross it. Therefore they do not go to Bheraghat, thereby missing the sight of its exceptional beauty.

What the *Gita* is to the *Mahabharata*, and what the 18th chapter<sup>6</sup> is to the *Gita*, so is Bheraghat to the Narmada. This was the most glorious manifestation of all of the Narmada's beauty. That was why we stayed there for two nights.

I would now like to share with my readers the story of Sister Miraben. She was a 57-year-old Englishwoman of Scandinavian origin. Her real name was Marietta Maddrell, but she chose the name 'Mira' while in India. She used to teach English at Lhasa in Tibet, and later moved to Hong Kong. She had been living in Himachal Pradesh since 1991. She had heard about the Narmada *parikrama*, and wished to undertake the pilgrimage. She donned saffron robes and started walking barefoot from Bharuch. Her health was not good. She was unable to walk for more than six or seven kilometres at a stretch. It took her more than a year to walk from Bharuch to Jabalpur.

An unfortunate incident had occurred in Jhansighat, the same place from where we had started our current walk. A saffron-robed *sadhu* had joined Mira and took on the responsibility of taking full care of her. Mira went to take a bath in the Narmada, entrusting all her belongings to the *sadhu*. When she returned, the *sadhu* and her wallet were missing. Her wallet contained travellers' cheques worth Rs 45000 and her passport.

"I had no idea that the stay and food for the Narmada pilgrimage would be available free of cost; otherwise I wouldn't have carried so much money," Mira said, adding: "As long as I was walking alone, I was in perfect joy. The problem began when I started walking with someone else." She filed a report at the nearest police station and faxed the information of her missing traveller's cheques to her bank. Yet, she harboured no anger for the deceitful *sadhu*.

Mira managed to reach Gwarighat in Jabalpur. A friend brought her to my home. Her bare foot was badly injured and swollen. Philip, a 26-year-old German, was with her. He had spent five years in India and was an expert in yoga<sup>7</sup> and the *asanas*<sup>8</sup>. He had been Mira's disciple and had visited Europe regularly to conduct yoga classes there. He had walked the

<sup>6</sup>18th chapter: This is the chapter of the *Bhagwad Gita* titled 'The Final Revelations of the Ultimate Truth', where Lord Krishna sums up all the teachings and philosophical observations of the previous chapters

<sup>7</sup>Yoga: A physical, mental and spiritual discipline that originated in ancient India and is practiced with the aim of attaining permanent peace

<sup>8</sup>*asanas*: Yogic postures

banks of the Narmada to take care of his *guru*. "I have no blood relation with Philip, but he is more than a son to me," said Mira. Philip mentioned that he felt such joy in walking along the Narmada for 15 days that he intended to resume walking around it *post-Dussehra*, Mira would complete her pilgrimage in the stipulated three years, three months and 13 days, but after completing some important work, Philip would accomplish the *parikrama* in just four or five months.

Both knew a bit of Hindi and could write it too. Mira said to me, "In the next *Chaturmas*, I will keep a Hindi dictionary with me and read your book with its help." I asked her, "Don't you feel afraid of walking alone?" She replied: "How am I alone? I have Mother Narmada with me."

Philip left for Varanasi and Mira walked on towards Amarkantak. This was at the end of 1999, and there was much hullabaloo about the onset of the new millennium. I thought Mira would stay on to celebrate the new year. But she left on 30th December, 1999. I bowed my head to the courage and will-power of a foreign daughter of Mother Narmada. She is a travelling saint with no home.

Some five months later, at the end of May 2000, Mira reached the Bargi Colony on the opposite bank. It was 40 kilometres from Jabalpur. She intended to observe *Chaturmas* there. Meanwhile, Philip had sent a big packet for Mira to my address. I took it to her. The packet had a number of letters from all over the world addressed to her. One of the letters was from her bank manager. He informed her that the full amount of the lost travellers' cheques was safe, and that she could withdraw it any time she wanted.

Mira was a good swimmer. In England, she used to study aquatic life, diving into the depths of the sea. Sometimes, she swam in the Narmada for hours without any strain. Some villagers even mistook her for a magician. Someone suggested that she should write a travelogue, capturing her experiences. She had declared: "I would never write it. By writing one, it would attract the wrong kind of tourists on the banks of the Narmada and that would disturb the sanctity of the place." A local journalist had asked for her photograph to accompany her story for publication in a newspaper. She flatly refused. "I want solitude," she emphasised. "I don't want people to come here and disturb that solitude!"

Mira was a determined woman. She had been an English teacher.

She could have earned well by writing about her amazing travels. But she chose to remain unknown. In today's world of aggressive marketing and self-promotion, choosing anonymity is rare. But Mira was an exception.

I asked her: "What will you do after this journey?"

"For a year, I will live in Amarkantak," she declared. "After that, I will build a hut on the banks of the Narmada and live there—definitely in Madhya Pradesh."

She had no intention of going back to England. In past 17 years, she had been to England just once. At the age of 17, she had read the translated version of the *Gita*. From then on, she developed a love for India. She had been happy in Lhasa too. But she said: "These days of the Narmada pilgrimage are the best days of my life. I haven't ever been so happy!"

Mira had indeed achieved true happiness, which is otherwise hard to come by.

Philip had sent Mira and me a letter. He wrote:

"I am writing this letter from Germany. I had to come here for a sad reason. Aakash had got affected with a fatal disease. (He was from Bhilai. We were together in Dharmshala, in Himachal Pradesh and in Germany too. His wife Corinna is German). An intensive operation was conducted on him, but after the operation, he failed to regain consciousness. He had been kept on life support till his father reached him. After the father saw his son, the life support was turned off. I regret I couldn't come (to India) on time. He was just 30 years old and was like my brother and Mira's son. His father is very sad. He will bring his son's ashes back to India. Corinna is trying to put on a brave face, but from within, I don't know what is happening to her. Who can say? Fortunately my girlfriend Brit is with me now and we are consoling the devastated family members.

My mother's ill health is another reason for my visit here. At first, my parents were not willing to agree to my going on the Narmada pilgrimage, but I later convinced them. I will come to India by the first week of August. I'll go to Pune first and then come to meet you both in Jabalpur. My English painter friend will be coming along with me. He is very interested in seeing your collage. *Post-Dussehra*, I'll start the Narmada pilgrimage. Regards to Mother Narmada and my dear Mother India.





## 22. Bheraghat: Marble Rocks and Dhuandhar

How wonderful that the Marble Rocks and Dhuandhar are so close to our Jabalpur!

Our trip was on a magnificent run. It was such a blessing that we did not have to rush along on this stretch of the walk. We strolled along and wandered around at our pleasure. We had five days to walk 50 kilometres, and had planned it so that we could spend a whole day at Bheraghat. Boating in the Narmada to see the Marble Rocks of Bheraghat is an unforgettable experience. It attracts tourists all the year round.

The river was in spate at that time of year, due to the release of water from the Bargi Dam reservoir, and the current was strong too, so the boatmen did not ply their boats for trips up through the Marble Rocks as far as Bandarkudni or the 'Monkey Jump.' They pointed out the spot from a distance. Bandarkudni can be reached on foot too, so we took a local lad with us and walked along the path above the marble cliffs. First we had to descend when the path dipped and then we had to climb up again. Then there was a labyrinth of boulders. It looked as if the river had become confused about which way to go.

At last we arrived at Bandarkudni. The great cliffs of marble begin at Dhuandhar obstructing Narmada's way. These rocks must once have told the Narmada: "If you can manage to gouge your way through here, then you can proceed, and you will be able to meet the sea. If you can't cut out your way through them, then go back, right back to Amarkantak!"

That challenge must have sufficiently provoked the Narmada: she successfully cleaved the rocks and made her way through, although it took her hundreds of thousands of years to do so. Her feat could also be described as breaking down a solid door and bursting through. (Now these rocks could not very well say: "O Narmada! Is this the way to come into an gentleman's house?") The Narmada disappears from view into the deep gorge cut into the rocks. Then she flows for about a kilometre through this other-worldly stone forest to emerge at Panchvati Ghat. This is the site of the world-famous Marble Rocks. A writer of modern times might exclaim: "The Narmada has put on a gown of marble!"

At one place the Narmada became so narrow that it looked as if a monkey could jump across, which gave rise to the name: 'Monkey Jump' which is the literal meaning of 'Bandarkudni'. The marble cliffs are as sharp as if they had been sliced with a knife. The river and the rocks rival each other in beauty here: it is 'beauty within beauty' indeed.

It appeared to me that Narmada's feminine allure could best be appreciated here in the rocks of marble, and it is here that she is the most conscious of her beauty.

The scene combines splendid solitude, a slender waterway and the sheer white cliffs of marble standing on sentinel duty. The Narmada goes on her way, flowing in a supremely regal style. We had penetrated into Narmada's private chambers, as it were, a place of quiet repose after the surge and swirl of constant movement. It was a peaceful, solitary and elegant retreat where one could sit in silence and put one's thoughts in order. The Narmada herself seemed engrossed in meditation.

The *Dandi swami* sat in quiet repose, withdrawn into himself, his eyes closed. The Narmada's queenly beauty was so captivating that one could not bear to leave. The heart longed to become a tiny bird, to swoop into this abode of beauty and remain there.

The ladies in our group began to sing *Narmada Ashtakam*<sup>1</sup> in sweet chorus. The lilting waves of the hymn flowed from the women's throats

<sup>1</sup>*Narmada Ashtakam*: An anthem to the Narmada composed by the 8th century AD Hindu philosopher Adi Shankaracharya

and floated all over the valley. Had I been a poet, I would have written the following lines in the style of an ancient Chinese poet:

*"The milky marble rocks  
Remnants of the kiss of water on the cheeks of the rocks  
In the clean and sacred Narmada  
The full moon washing its soul  
Even on this lovely night too  
My old friend, won't you come?"*

"There's an unusual cave nearby. Come on, let's go there," suggested our guide.

On the way, Bhagirathi said, "Just as Narmada washes these rocks clean with her water, we too should keep our souls clean by washing them in the perfumed water of meditation." Bhagirathi was engaged in religious practice and kept coming up with beautiful and thought-provoking remarks. Pinki would tease her, mentioning that her aunt Bhagirathi suffered from "fits of philosophy".

The rock with the cave came into sight. Water had carved away parts of this massive rock to create three large circular holes. Mrs. Muley was of short structure and sat in a lotus position at the base of one of the holes, looking exactly like a statue. "It looks like one of the *yoginis*<sup>2</sup> from the Chausat Yogini Temple<sup>3</sup> has come and taken her seat here," said Nanabhahi.

Then we came to Panchvati Ghat, the starting point for the boat trips. A nearby hill was crowned with the thousand-year-old Chausat Yogini Temple. There were nearly 80 *yogini* statues there, beautifully sculpted but unfortunately mutilated, on the circular ramparts surrounding the temple. The graceful artistry of these statues could not have left anybody unmoved. Several members of our group went up to view this place that combined religion and art.

We reached Dhuandhar in the afternoon.

This is where the energetic Narmada takes a running leap into a large pool. The powerful arms of the solid marble rocks below are ready with

<sup>2</sup>*yoginis*: Female practitioners of yoga engaged in a spiritual quest

<sup>3</sup>Chausat Yogini Temple: A temple depicting 64 (or sometimes many more) *yoginis* carved in stone in various poses. There are four such temples in India, two in Madhya Pradesh and two in Odisha

their full strength to wrestle with the ferocious current of the Narmada. It was an extraordinary sight: we watched the mighty current pouncing, bulging and swirling into waves, thundering and crashing all the while! It was as though the rush of water, while plunging into the pool, was leaping into the jaws of death. But the very next moment, up it rises, up it springs, charging onwards with tumultuous speed, exulting in its victory. It seems that death is but the doorway to a new life!

A flea-bitten dog had trotted along with us since the first day of our journey. It walked along silently and ate whatever leftovers the ladies gave it. From the second day, we adopted it as a member of our group. Dasgupta grew very attached to the dog and had even taken a photo of it. He planned to treat it in Jabalpur. But on the third day, in Bheraghat, the dog left us and wandered off. We all missed it, but Dasgupta in particular felt so bereaved that he had his head shaved in a gesture of ritual mourning by the same barber who had shaved off Sarayukant's beard. It must certainly have given some solace to Sarayukant, as the barber's razor had left many marks on his face. But Dasgupta's pate bore many more cuts. However, he would not allow the barber to touch his luxuriant moustache. (He was the only one in our group sporting a moustache.) Some people were of the opinion that he dyed his moustache which was why it was so black. I thought, these people had no courage to have moustache but are suspicious about others. Be that as it may, from that day onwards Sarayukant and Dasgupta became *gurubhais*, both having been initiated by the same barber.

My sons and daughters-in-law joined us in the afternoon. Ankita and Kaniska came with them. Kaniska's cries of joy were counterpointed by the clicking of cameras. The daughters-in-law took charge of the meal preparations. Kanta took care of every member of the group like a matriarch. Sarayukant called her 'my Annapurna<sup>4</sup> sister-in-law'. That was acceptable, but then he said publicly to me, "Kanta looks like your daughter."

I had been hearing such remarks for the past 20 years, so it did not upset me or surprise me. When someone had first made that comment, I had experienced a shock. Now I have got used to it.

My sons and daughters-in-law went back home after serving dinner. Then we discovered that as Dasgupta was in mourning for the loss of his

<sup>4</sup>Annapurna: Literally translating into 'full of food', the name is usually taken to mean 'the goddess of harvests'

dog, he had abstained from eating. However, after our entreaties, he was willing to eat only *rasgulla*<sup>5</sup> sweets. He ate 13 *rasgulla*. After a person's departure, the number 13 becomes significant. Dasgupta intended to observe the mourning for three days, but we were unable to supply him with the requisite number of *rasgulla*. We persuaded him that one day mourning with 13 *rasgulla* was quite sufficient for a dog of unknown pedigree.

The *Dandi swami* wanted us to be ready to set off at crack of dawn to avoid the heat. He woke everybody up, but as it took a long time for so many people to get ready, he set off alone. Sarayukant remarked: "Swami ji wakes up in a rush, gets ready in a rush, starts walking in a rush, and then after he reaches his destination gets bored! Does it mean something?"

While Sarayukant had a jolly nature, the *Dandi swami* was serious and highly disciplined. Strict discipline was the one principle he upheld in all aspects of his life. He was the most severe with himself. With his meagre belongings and spartan meals, he still had the energy to walk ahead of everyone. In the early hours of the morning, when everyone was still fast asleep, he would bathe in the river and sit in meditation.

The path ahead would go via Dhuandhar. Others in the group would be late leaving, so I set out alone for Dhuandhar. I could hear the roar of the waterfalls from afar. Then the smoky spray came into sight. In a little while I was standing in front of the 'Falls of Smoke'. It displayed the raging anger of the river. The water surged swiftly and powerfully, like a conqueror on full battle alert, swaggering and shouting war-cries. The spray that rose from the falls was lit up by the rays of the sun.

I must have come to Dhuandhar at least 50 times before. Yet, every time I come, I stare at the falls as if I am seeing them for the first time. I had come to the falls at least three times with my father, half a century ago.

There were no buses or tempos in those days; so my father and I had come by train to Bheraghat Station, gone to Dhuandhar on foot and walked back all the way to Jabalpur again! Father and son had walked 25 kilometres together. If I close my eyes, I can picture it all clearly, even today. I felt as if my father had initiated me into the beauty of the Narmada, and if the blood of a wanderer flows in my veins, it definitely came from my father.

<sup>5</sup>*rasgulla*: An Indian sweet, made of cottage cheese, shaped into balls like dumplings and steeped in sugar syrup

I have seen Dhuandhar in its countless aspects—including in opulence and in destitution. When the river seethed with floodwater, the waterfalls would get submerged. I have seen Dhuandhar brimming with the monsoon rain, and I have also seen it threadbare when the whole riverbed dried up in the summer. And when I had stayed here once for three whole days and nights, on a moonlit night I even saw a rainbow in the waterfall: a lucky white rainbow! A colourless rainbow!

(A description of a night rainbow occurs in Sanskrit literature. The poet-playwright Shudrak<sup>6</sup> wrote in his play *Mrichkatik* that Charudatta<sup>7</sup>, who was in his garden-house at night, suddenly saw a rainbow. I suppose Charudatta's delightful garden-house must have been somewhere near Dhuandhar. Vasantasena<sup>8</sup>, who surely lived near Bandarkudni, must have come here to meet her sweetheart and given it the name '*Dhumraprapat*'<sup>9</sup> or '*Dhumradhara*'<sup>10</sup> which became Dhuandhar afterwords).

There is less variation in the volume of water at Dhuandhar now than before. Due to the Bargi Dam, there is often as much water flowing in the dry months as in the rainy season.

The force of water wears away rocks. As the rocks wear away the waterfall recedes upstream. The Niagara Falls in the United States have receded 10 kilometres. Quite possibly, in the childhood years of the Narmada, millions of years ago, Dhuandhar must have been where Bandarkudni is now.

Why are waterfalls so eternally fascinating?

To flow is necessary for a river. If a river is stagnant, it is no longer a river. It must flow for its very existence. Flowing is compulsory, but waterfalls are its extra gift. Light and heat are necessary qualities of the sun but the seven colours of the rainbow are its extra gift. Rain is an essential quality of the clouds but thunder and lightning are their extra gifts. It is the extra gift that adorns a useful object with beauty. Where utility comes to an end, beauty begins. When both qualities are united in one

<sup>6</sup>Shudrak: A Kshatriya king who was a poet and playwright. His exact dates are not known but he is thought to have lived between the 2nd century BC and 5th century AD. He was a devotee of Lord Shiva

<sup>7</sup>Charudatta: The central character of Shudrak's 10-act Sanskrit drama *Mrichkatik*. In the play, Charudatta is an impoverished Brahmin in love with a wealthy courtesan

<sup>8</sup>Vasantasena: Another character in the play *Mrichkatik*

<sup>9</sup>*Dhumraprapat*: Literally, 'smoke-coloured'

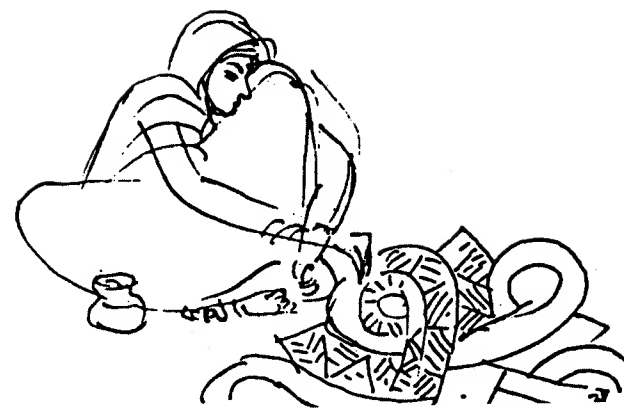
<sup>10</sup>*Dhumradhara*: Literally the 'smoking waterfall'

object, it becomes perfect. Dhuandhar and Bandarkudni are outstanding examples. Dhuandhar is the splendour of the Narmada, Bandarkudni is her modesty. At Dhuandhar there is passion in her joy, at Bandarkudni, she displays the constraints of peace. Yet the Narmada's passion and her self-restraint, her exuberance and her reserve, her riotous nature and her silence all belong to a single entity.

The Dhuandhar waterfall is like a compulsive speaker, who only knows how to talk, refusing to listen to anyone else. It either drowns out our words by its thunder or sends them flying upwards in its spray. But Bandarkudni is a very good listener. It listens very intently. Keeping silent itself, it encourages others to speak. However good a speaker is, a good listener is equally important; perhaps more so. Until a person has become a good listener, he or she should not be allowed to speak.

At Dhuandhar, the Narmada is in as much frenzy as a hero of the *Mahabharata*. The Narmada at Bandarkudni is as self-disciplined as a hero of the *Ramayana*. The violent excitement and impetuous enthusiasm of Dhuandhar give way to restraint and quiet sacredness at Bandarkudni. The Narmada can be as excitable as a *Mahabharata* hero and also as self-possessed as a *Ramayana* hero. Nothing is impossible for the Narmada.

Narmada is, after all, the Narmada.



### 23. Bheraghat to Gwarighat (Jabalpur)

A river is in quest of the sea and a *parikramavasi* is in quest of a river. Someday, both quests reach fulfilment. I too would reach my goal at mid-day on the following day. I was like a traveller on the last leg of a journey, nearing home. Kanta had become my travelling companion, walking with me on this final stretch of my pilgrimage. The joy I felt was indescribable. It had always seemed to me, though, that she had been with me on every trek I undertook; invisible, mantled in a cloak of darkness, but always beside me.

Some of our companions had gone on ahead. I walked on until I caught up with Premdas. "I am neither ahead of the group nor behind the group, *Na ghar ka na ghat ka* (neither at home nor at the riverside)," I commented.

"You have made the riverside your home," he said.

Oh, what sweet words!

Both Sarayukant and Premdas were very eloquent in speech; both were also very witty. Their wit was pure fun and never edged with sarcasm; they never hurt anyone. They were both sensitive, good-humoured

and friendly. Their quick wit and rapid repartee entertained and endeared them to the whole group.

Some members of our group had gone ahead, some were trailing behind; some were on the higher path, some like walking along the river's edge. A group as large as ours tended to get messy.

The village ahead was Gopalpur. The name of the village reminded me of my *guru*, Nandlal Bose. Nandlal often went on vacation to a beautiful village also called Gopalpur on the coast of Orissa (now Odisha). There he painted seascapes, capturing the roaring surf over and over again. He also painted innumerable pictures of fishermen at work: hoisting their boats on their shoulders; placing their boats on the beach; launching their boats into the sea and riding the waves. It was in Gopalpur that he created a series of paintings on Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's life with a few, quick, powerful brush strokes. Today those paintings are an immortal legacy in the treasury of Indian art.

I had been a student in the art school at Shantiniketan from 1948 to 1953. It was my *guru* from whom I learnt how to perceive beauty. The function of the eyes is merely to see; they cannot discriminate between the beautiful and the ugly: it is all the same to them. Only one who develops an aesthetic perception can tell the difference between beauty and ugliness. Generally this perception is infused by the teacher. If it is lacking, even if an ocean of beauty may lie before one's eyes, one will not be able to see it.

To use a contemporary metaphor, there are several channels in our eyes receiving visual inputs. If we do not have the beauty channel, we will not be able to perceive beauty, even if it lies right in front of us. We see it, but unseeingly. The dormant perception of beauty is usually awakened by the right teacher. When the village of Gopalpur suddenly revived memories of my teacher, I offered him my heartfelt thanks for awakening in me the ability to perceive beauty.

We reached Lamhetighat in the middle of the day. The Lamheti Rocks have become internationally famous, and due to their unusual formations and antiquity, have been a centre of attraction for geologists the world over.

We sat down to rest outside a temple. After a while I saw my nephew Anand, his bride Ritu and my youngest son Niraj approaching by the

dangerous riverside path. Anand and Ritu had wed just three months ago, and instead of going on a honeymoon, they had come on this pilgrimage.

Vijay and Kosta, among the youngest members of our group, were always willing to be of service to their elders. They were the last to arrive at Lamhetighat. They brought news of my former students who had gone to Bheraghat to meet me. As we had already left Bheraghat, they were on their way to Lamhetighat. Just then, they arrived in a Maruti car. I had taught them about 45 years ago. All had become senior engineers, and were now approaching retirement. They had not forgotten their teacher after so many years! They brought cool, sweetened milk for everyone. Introducing them to Sarayukant, I said: "These were my students."

"Students are a teacher's fixed deposit. The yield comes at the due date." Sarayukant's spontaneous and gracious words were infused with truth.

We planned to stay that night at Tilwaraghat. Seeing that walking had become very difficult for Sarayukant, my former students offered him a ride. "Come with us, we'll give you a lift upto Tilwaraghat," they said. As the big and burly Sarayukant took his seat in my former students' chariot, a line from the *Ramayana* suddenly sprang to mind:

"*Ravan rathi, virath Raghuvira*"<sup>1</sup>

("Ravan is in his chariot; Ram is without chariot".)

But I did not dare say it aloud. The quick-witted Sarayukant would immediately have a suitable retort and I would have got myself into a mess.

After seeing Sarayukant off, we continued on our way. There is pleasure in giving words a double interpretation: it is like giving one month's pay and extracting two months' work!

We divided ourselves into two groups from Lamhetighat onwards. The younger ones went along the riverside; it was a rough, rocky and dangerous path. The *Dandi swami*, Scott, Morag, Pinki and all the younger people chose to go that way. Most of the ladies and the remaining members preferred the less demanding upper track. I went with the latter group.

<sup>1</sup>*Ravan rathi, virath Raghuvira*: This famous line from the epic *Ramayana* is also interpreted as "Ravan is in a chariot, Lord Ram is on foot." Ravan, the 10-headed demon king, is the antagonist to Lord Ram in the epic

We had stopped to rest briefly at an *ashram* in Lamhetighat, when someone remarked, "All of you too could go by the riverside route." All the ladies immediately became eager to take that difficult path. That way was really difficult. At some places, the path swerved right down to the water. The steep ups and downs were physically exhausting, the trail was uncomfortably tough and the hot sun drained us physically. Yet not only were the ladies walking along very enthusiastically along the path that hugged the riverbank, but were chatting away merrily at the same time! I was amazed at their boundless energy.

One lady was quite overweight. "Have you always been plump, sister, or did you put on weight later in life?" someone asked her.

With a deep sigh she replied: "When my granny died it took eight people to lift her. She, my mother and all my aunts were all fat."

Ahead was a *dhobighat*<sup>2</sup>. Washermen and washerwomen were laundering clothes on the rocks. A little boy was playing in the water. One of the ladies in our group gave him a glass and asked him to bring clean water from a spot in the river that was away from where the clothes were being washed. The boy swam far out into the river, filled the glass and brought it back. His mother was washing a pair of trousers. He had just handed over the glass when his mother thwacked him hard with the wet trousers. The poor boy just saved himself from falling over. The ladies were furious with the mother.

"What sort of mother are you, hitting your boy like that?"

"You know nothing, sister. I've told him thousands of times but he just won't stop playing in the water. He nearly drowned yesterday."

The ladies hushed the boy by giving him sweets.

We found a long row of tiny little waterfalls further on. The water tumbled over in small streams, making it look as though the river was shrugging a burden off her shoulders.

We reached Tilwaraghat late in the afternoon. There was a temple with a *yagyashala*, a hall for ritual sacrifices. We would stay there for the night. Bread rolls were being baked over the embers of a cowdung-cake fire when we arrived. Shailendra prepared the bread rolls for our group, as well as a dish of vegetables, and served them himself to everyone. He had come to us as a complete stranger and in just three days he had become an intrinsic part of our group.

<sup>2</sup>*dhobighat*: An open-air area, usually beside a water body, reserved for laundering clothes by a community of washermen and washerwomen

That was the night of the full moon. Most of the ladies were our family members. My three daughters-in-law had also come from home, so a *garba* dance was organised that night. Nita danced the *garba* best of all, while Mridula was the best singer and Vijay the best musician. The men also joined in the *garba*. Seventy-year-old Premdas was the best dancer among the men. He made it seem that a 17-year-old youth lived in his 70-year-old body. Sarayukant dubbed Premdas the 'Dance Hero'. Quiet, reserved and smiling, Dasgupta won acclaim as the best member of our group.

I love to 'swim' in the night sky. That night, incidentally, was a full moon night. A large and resplendent moon was on the rise. As I gazed at it, it appeared to me that it resembled the great hero Parshuram. Who knows how many times the full moon had rid the sky of the stars! At the mere sight of it, the stars—otherwise the emperors of the sky, take to their heels and flee.

'O Moon,' I addressed it silently, 'you have been my constant companion right from the beginning of this walk. I have described you so many times, in so many ways. I have described you so absurdly today for the first time, but my intention is honest. I want people to look at you, to bathe in your moonlight. It is sometimes necessary to use such crude means to attract people's attention. Do not take offence. You are no mean mischief-maker yourself. Sitting up there, how you torment young lovers—and our seas as well. The Bhils in Shulpan Jhari rob travellers. The travellers address the Bhils as 'Uncles' so that they will be spared. Now I know why we in India call you 'Uncle' too: you are the Bhil of the heavenly Shulpan Jhari!'

Our granddaughters Neha and Juhi came early the next morning. Nanabhai's wife Manju had arrived the night before. It was the final day of our journey; they would all walk with us. Our youngest son Niraj was already with us. We would be three generations walking together on this last day of my *parikrama*. Even if they forgot everything else about their grandfather, I hoped that Neha and Juhi would never forget their todays Narmada walk.

We went onwards from Tilwaraghat, walking through the Gandhi memorial. There was a ditch ahead, and it was horrendous to cross. It was quite deep and we sank into the wet mud up to our knees. The sticky

mud was so repulsive that my whole body shuddered. What a torturous, viscous welcome it gave us! Neha and Juhi had to be carried on our shoulders. The plump lady stumbled and fell in. Someone remarked, "Due to this, the water level in the ditch has increased to some extent."

The ladies were most happy on this walk. They had had a complete break from their relentless daily domestic chores. They were thrilled to be free, lively in their conversation and their faces shone with joy. There was one lady who often lagged behind. Asked why she couldn't keep pace with the rest, she said: "My arms are just fine, but my legs are lazy!"

As we approached our goal, our excitement increased.

We reached Gwarighat at last, with the *Dandi swami* leading the whole group. The auspicious start of my pilgrimage had been from this point, and it was here again when it drew to an end. Gwarighat had marked the beginning and the end of my journey. A large number of well-wishers had assembled to welcome us. We all freshened up with leisurely baths. Then I took Kanta's hand in mine and together we lit and launched a light-offering in worship of Mother Narmada. We were both deeply moved. My long walk of 2,624 kilometres had been completed. The glorious day I had awaited for years had arrived at last. I was overflowing with joy.

Our daughters-in-law dressed Morag in a sari for the occasion. She looked even more attractive draped in it, like a Venus arisen from the Narmada.

Bhupendra Dubey, a devotee of the Narmada, and his wife Vibha arranged a reception for all of us in the hall of a temple set amid huge trees. I had never imagined that so many people would gather to welcome us back. The ceremony began with the *Dandi swami* leading us in devotional songs. Speakers praised me in lofty terms. My students showered me with gifts. Sarayukant read out an encomium. Fulsome adjectives should be used very sparingly, but such adjectives were used profusely in his address. Giving thanks, I said:

"Rather too much has been said in my praise just now. It would have been appropriate at this time if my mother and father were alive to see all this. My father would have been very happy to have heard your speeches and my mother, who was so innocent, would even have believed them. I am happy that I was able to complete today, in 1999, the pilgrimage I began

in 1977. When I look back I myself am quite amazed that it could be done. All I know is that it is over—more by good fortune than by ability.

"A task that could have been completed in one year took me 22 years. How stupid I was! It was good in one way though: as I wandered beside the Narmada for so many years, my love for her grew. I wrote about her and made paintings of her. I spent the best moments of my life on the banks of the Narmada. The Narmada perfumed my life; she filled my cup to overflowing with her nectar. During the *parikrama*, I saw so many mountains, crossed so many rivers, and traversed so many dense forests. I even encountered snakes and a crocodile. I received the hospitality of village women. I had an audience with countless *sadhus* and *sanyasis*. I spent nights in tumbledown *dharmshalas*; I walked along beautiful but difficult footpaths. Huge open skies; fields with waving green crops; waterfalls large and small; gorges resounding with the roar of waterfalls; frolicking water birds and who knows what else I was able to see. How enjoyable those days were—one following another!

"On the banks of the Narmada I saw both the supreme grandeur of nature and the simple beauty of humanity. How many times people opened the doors of their homes and their hearts to me! (Doors were not always opened like that. At times I was even driven away. Still I met far more good people than bad.) They gave me so much affection; I could not take it all in. The love of these pure-hearted people has made a lasting impression on my mind.

"How can I forget the pilgrims, the sight of whom brought home to me the true meaning of faith! The faith of a *parikramavasi* is indeed supreme. To walk with all one's attention focussed on a single river for years—according to the rules it should take 3 years, 3 months and 13 days—is no less hardship. No little courage either. There is danger too, and renunciation. And what do they possess?

"Yet, many of *parikramavasis* have no trace of self-pity. I learned from them that simplicity is the root of happiness. We should keep the luggage of our life light, filled only with bare necessities. Otherwise its junk will make us sink.

Every bend of the Narmada revealed something new to me. Every time, the sheer beauty of the Narmada made an indelible impression on my mind, an impression to take home with me. The Narmada filled me



with her beauty; I was completely overwhelmed by it. I am quite incapable of expressing it. The fruits of the Narmada's beauty are expressed in my works. If only I could express it fully. I have been able to show you only a very little, a very slight glimpse of her beauty. This is just the beginning. In future, countless writers and artists will come and do justice to the beauty of the Narmada. Friends, with this my commitment to the Narmada has been fulfilled. Now I am going home!"

In this final sentence my voice choked with emotion. I stopped talking.

It was all over. A great feast had been prepared for everyone. My daughters-in-law had taken upon themselves the responsibility for providing food for all the guests. My sons too left no stone unturned to ensure a grand celebration. When it was over, we returned home.

I had left my footprints on the sands of the Narmada. I should have been happy, but when I came home, wept bitterly. The Narmada had terminated my service!

Now there was nothing special left for me to say. Abiding by literary norms, I should say no more, but I just can't be reticent about what I need to express. Now I have only two pending desires. One is that when my time is up and I am lying on my deathbed, I should breathe my last on the bank of the Narmada, preferably on a mountain slope overlooking the river. And when I die . . .

'Breezes of the Narmada bank, take me on your shoulders! Birds of the Narmada bank, sing your songs with full-throated melody! *Arjuna* trees of the Narmada bank, prepare my pyre! Sizzling heat of noon, light my pyre! Rocks of the Narmada, as long as my pyre blazes, stand vigil beside it! Waves of the Narmada, when you are reddened by the rays of the setting sun, may my ashes be flowed in the Narmada! And, Mother Narmada, take me forever into your lap!'

Enough! Now I do not want to say any more, otherwise the conventions of literature will be seriously violated.

My second desire is that on the Day of Judgment, when I receive my call, I should be summoned like this: "Where is that 'Man crazy with the beauty of Narmada?'"

Enough!



## Epilogue

I had set out to touch the profound depths of the beauty of the Narmada, but was only able to touch her surface. I set out to gather her pearls but was only able to collect shells. If these too appear beautiful, imagine how lovely the pearls of the Narmada must be!

There are two reasons why the Narmada is so special to me. One is that the Narmada is an incredibly beautiful river. The Ganga is also beautiful but only as far down her course as Haridwar. After that, she flows through level plains like a canal to the distant sea, while the Narmada flows to the end of her course through mountains, forests and valleys, creating one splendid waterfall after another. If there was ever a beauty contest for the rivers of India, the Narmada would win the first prize. That is why I called my first book in Hindi: '*Narmada: River of Beauty*'.

The other special feature of the Narmada is that she is the only river in the world that is circumambulated; there is none other that receives this extraordinary form of worship. Thousands of pilgrims have come for centuries to undertake the *parikrama* of the Narmada. That is why I called my book in Gujarati: '*Parikrama of Mother Narmada*'. In this way both the

special features of the Narmada are expressed in the titles of my books.

Right from the outset I decided that I was not going to write in the ancient religious style of a *Narmada Purana* or a paean of glorification of a *Reva Mahatmaya*. That would not be appropriate for contemporary times. I was compelled to write the biography of the Narmada: the visible, down-to-earth Narmada. That was why I adopted the methods that biographers generally use: meeting the subject of their biography many times; conducting interviews; summarising the conversations; travelling to relevant places; taking pictures—in short, writing a factual biography based on all this material. This is exactly what I did. I met the Narmada again and again, walked along with her, conversed with her, sketched her, saw her beauty with my own eyes and only then was I ready to write this book. My writings on the Narmada are based on a first-person eyewitness account of this great river.

I had walked 1,800 kilometres on foot along the banks of Narmada between 1977 and 1988, and given an account of that walk in my previous book: *Narmada—River of Beauty*. The Narmada is 1,312 kilometres long. Adding together the length of each of her banks, a *parikramavasi* has to walk a total of 2,624 kilometres. Having earlier walked 1,800 kilometres, another 800 kilometres on the north bank still remained for me to complete the circuit.

Nine years went by. After that long interval of nine years, I was reborn as a Narmada walker. I completed the remaining north bank *parikrama* between 1996 and 1999. This book is the account of those north bank journeys.

Enormous statues are first cast in two halves, and then after each half is cleaned, the two halves are joined together. It was not possible for me to walk the entire Narmada *parikrama* of 2,624 kilometres in one stretch. That was why I made piecemeal trips. I have linked the separate pieces of my long journey together in these books. Those shorter journeys were just the right method for me. Returning home from each trip, I would write an account of that journey and make collages. After a period of rest, I would be recharged with energy for the next venture.

In these walks I was saturated with beauty. It was my endeavour to express it—in lines, in colours and in words. It is true that I am both an artist and a writer, but I am an ordinary artist and an ordinary writer. I

used to think it would have been better if God had made me only an artist, but an artist of high calibre, or only a writer, but an outstanding writer. Why did God make me half of one and half of the other; half partridge, half quail?

But now I think if God had made me only an artist—even the best of artists—then who would write about the Narmada? Or if I had been made only a writer—even a famous writer—then who would make the Narmada come alive with pictures? Instead of an extraordinary writer or artist, the Narmada needed a person combining both talents, even if only of ordinary quality.

The greatest benefit of being both writer and artist is that when I cannot describe the infinite beauty of the Narmada in words, colour and form come to my rescue: I can better express it in pictures. And when it appears that words would describe it best, then I put pen to paper. When Destiny made me half-artist and half-writer, it was no idiosyncrasy of his: rather it was foresight. That was why Destiny ensured my birth in the home of a father who loved nature and was fond of walking. That was why Destiny sent me to Gujarat, where our family originally hailed from, for a few years of my childhood, so that I would also be able to learn the language well enough to write in Gujarati. Destiny gave me Jabalpur for a home, with the Narmada flowing nearby, so my attachment to the Narmada began in childhood and Hindi became my own language.

Destiny sent me to Shantiniketan for five years, where I learnt to perceive beauty from my teachers, wise as the *rishis* of old. I used to despise my skeletal body, but now I consider that a skinny, wiry frame is better suited for a *parikrama*. Kanta always blessed me with encouragement and our sons relieved me of all the mundane chores so that I could devote all my time to work for the Narmada. If a single link had been missing from this long chain of circumstances, my work would have been flawed. Destiny had prepared me well and given me all that I needed for my future life right from the start. All I had to do was simply follow Destiny's instructions.

Nonetheless, I have only been able to fill a little thimble from the vast ocean of the Narmada's beauty. My efforts are but the feeble efforts of an ordinary mortal. It is true that I have not been able to plumb the depths of her loveliness. Who can fold up and pack the infinite? That is why what

I have brought to the reader is merely 'a bird's beak full of water'.

I do have one regret though: that I was not born 100 years ago when the natural beauty was intact and undisturbed; when the pristine virgin forests of the Narmada were not hacked down; when innumerable wild animals and myriad birds lived in their homes in those forests; when mankind had not wounded and scarred nature and when the Narmada flowed undisturbed through unobstructed valleys. Then I would have been able to see the Narmada in the full splendour of her pristine glory.

When I set out on the first of these walks I was 50 years old. I could have started the final enterprise 10 years earlier; I wasted a decade. There must be very few people, however, who have not drifted through some—or several—years of their lives and have nothing to regret.

I certainly violated the rules of the *parikrama*, though not in the sense of not doing the entire *parikrama* in one stretch, nor of not walking barefoot, nor of not begging for alms. No, that was due to my own incapacity, my inadequacy. By that I mean that for me, it was not a religious commitment but a commitment to beauty, to art and to literature. The pilgrimage that was limited to the *sadhus* and *sanyasis*, the recluses, those who fulfil a vow and to villagers, I have taken it to lovers of art and literature. My pilgrimage was not religious but cultural.

I would like to share with you how I write. I am a rather feeble writer: it takes me five, or sometimes six days to write up an account of one day's walk. My writing is like a poor man's roof: after an hour of rain it leaks for 10 hours! I walked for a day, I wrote for a week. Writing is a sort of walking for me. I disapprove of haste. For me, writing is hard labour; I go over one piece several times, constantly cutting, adding and changing. I pay close attention to an economy of words. I quickly realised that inessential words weaken the essential ones. I also realised that fewer the decorative comparisons, the more the beauty is revealed. When the number of similes rises above the danger level, it irritates readers, because they obscure the main narrative.

I am an amphibian of two languages. I write first in Hindi. Then, when I convert my writing into Gujarati, new ideas, new similes and new fantasies come to mind. The Hindi version then gets left behind and has to be rewritten, but when I do that, something new pops up in that version again. Then it renders the Gujarati version insipid. I am therefore

constrained to write a fresh draft of the Gujarati version. The scripts of both the languages keep giving each other instructions: 'Write not like that, like this'!

Finally, when I find that both versions more or less correspond to each other, I accept that like children becoming adults, they have grown up and are ready to cross the threshold of the house to be sent off to the publishers. Even after all this, there is always a lingering dissatisfaction. I fear that something must be not quite right. All the articles cannot be of the same standard, there will be some weak passages.

Before giving hot and sweetened milk to a customer, the confectioner first pours it from one glass to another, back and forth, again and again, mixing the sugar, frothing the liquid. The milk dances between the two glasses, and then suddenly it is placed in our hands at its best. My work process is something like that. First I simmer my script slowly for a long time, and then I begin pouring it from the glass of one language into the glass of another. I mix in a little cream, let it cool a bit, fill the glass right up to the brim, and then I present it to my readers. And yet, there is always a lurking apprehension in my mind that someone will complain that the milk has been watered down!

Writing in two languages has proved very useful to me. The two languages reinforce each other. Yet it is undeniably an extremely laborious and time-consuming process. There was no little suffering involved in the writing, but I could not have abandoned it either. With extraordinary submission to the torture, I proceeded steadily at it. Afterwards, when the writing was over and done with, all the hard labour began to look worthwhile. Writing is both a torture and a boundless joy, agony and the escatsy.

Sometimes it seems to me that the work which should have been done by heart, is done by brain. Then it came to my mind that heart's job is over. If the brain scrutinizes it and weeds out the unwanted material, it would be still better. The heart, like a flighty girl, tends to dart about here and there. The brain, like a shrewd aunt, keeps it more or less under control ensuring that it does not go astray. If the heart and brain can come together to jointly run the household of the writer—that would be excellent!

And what about inspiration? When inspiration comes, it does its job and sneaks away like a cunning thief. Sometimes one is not even aware that it had come. There is no waiting for inspiration. (Who waits for a thief?) Hard work is like a daily labourer. He is our trusty companion. A creator should be a daily labourer, not one who waits for inspiration. This does not mean that inspiration is any less important. It may come for just a few seconds but those seconds are priceless. After labour has given a hundred blows with the mallet, if inspiration then gives just one quick blow with a hammer, the whole work springs to life. But only the hammer remains in our hands, the mallet keeps inspiration to itself.

Finally, I make a fair copy of my writing. I always write by hand. I am fond of letters written in black ink on white paper; they are like my own children. Where is the resonance in typed letters, the resonance that gives warmth and life to hand-written letters? And could typed letters equal my pearl-like lettering!

I know I am not a writer: that is why I have to put in a hundred times more effort into creating text. But now I have decided that I am not going to write another word. Fundamentally I am an artist. I just took a lease on literature from art. The time limit for my stay has expired and I am now going back to my own house. The purpose for which I took up the pen has been fulfilled. Therefore I have put away the pen.

Now I shall only create pictures. (Just the same, I have to admit that it is a pleasant feeling to see my writings in print, and to have people read them, and to hear them being praised.) I am satisfied that my sufferings and labours proved as successful as they did. These writings of mine are the wild flowers in the garden of literature.

If writers and scholars have praised my writing, perhaps a particle of this great river's significance has entered my books. People say my descriptions are poetic, but the Narmada would make anyone a poet. On the other hand, it has often seemed to me that it was not I who wrote my books. Whatever the Narmada whispered into my ear, I put down on paper. (If I had been able to write all by myself, would there not be at least 20 more books by me?) Someone might ask: why did the Narmada choose you? The answer is: because I am a good calligrapher! I can both draw pictures and write words together.

These travels along the Narmada occupy a central place in my life.

Without them my life would have been shallow and unfulfilled. My writings and pictures took shape from these journeys, the memories of which will always fill my heart with joy.

It is also true that those long walks along the banks of Narmada aroused in me a sacred love for nature. Sitting on the bank of the river, whether in the mountains or on the plains, or roaming the night sky, I experienced a high level of contact with the Divine that gave me immeasurable joy that is rarely to be found.

Now not one inch of the *parikrama* is left, but then, mine was not a traditional, continuous *parikrama*. It was done in phases, stopping time and again. At best, it was an apprenticeship for a proper uninterrupted *parikrama*. I will walk on that *parikrama* in my next life. May be I will be fit for the *parikrama* by then.



## My Husband

Kanta Vegad

In most love stories—and this is especially true of films—no sooner than a lover and his beloved get married, the story ends. The romance is over and the story draws to a close as after that, it would seem, there is nothing more that remains in the lives of the couple which is worth recounting.

This story is not about romance; it is a story about love post-marriage.

Before our wedding, Amritlal Vegad and I had never met. Compared to romantic stories, our story may appear dull and uneventful, but it is a true love story.

His parents were looking for a girl for him to marry. Someone suggested that they should see me, and so they came over to my home. His parents liked me. They initiated the talks for our engagement.

My family hails from the Kutch District of Gujarat; we were both from the same village. Just as his parents had settled down in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, my parents too moved out of Gujarat and settled down

in the city of Chaibasa in the state of Jharkhand. Chaibasa is near Jamshedpur. Jharkhand borders both the states of Odisha and West Bengal. I know both the languages—Oriya and Bengali.

In those days our financial situation was very good. My family owned manganese mines. The Vegad family was middle-class. But as we shared the same community background and had our roots in the same village in Kutch, and also as the family was known, my father agreed to my engagement with Amritlal Vegad. My father having given his consent, his father summoned his son by sending a telegram.

Peeping from behind the curtain, this is what I saw of him for the first time: an unshaven face, spectacles, pyjama pants that rode high above his ankles and cheap black rubber shoes. I was really not impressed.

But when I came to know that he had studied at Shantiniketan, and was a teacher, I too agreed to the engagement. I had heard a lot about Shantiniketan from my Bengali friends. They said that a teacher is a *guru*, so you will become a *guru patni*<sup>1</sup>.

But Amritlal Vegad did not agree! He said that he would like to see a few more girls. His mother, father and elder sister had all liked me, but they did not want to put any undue pressure on him. They left.

However, after seeing a few other girls, he felt that I was better than them. So we got engaged. I recalled a Hindi proverb: "*Lout ke buddu ghar ko aye*" (the dumbhead has finally returned home).

One year after our engagement, in 1955, we got married. Leaving behind my parents and my childhood in Chaibasa, I came to Jabalpur.

The very next day after my arrival in Jabalpur, my husband began digging a drain in front of the house with a pickaxe, a spade and a pan. I was shocked to see this side of him. His house still had an air of the wedding festivities; the guests had not yet departed, and there he was, engaged in physical labour.

My elder sister-in-law said, "Look at this dumb fellow. A daughter from a rich family has come to our home and he is digging a drain." She scolded him, so he was compelled to stop his labour with the job half-completed. He muttered in a low voice: "Wherever a religious ritual (*yagya*) is being performed, the demons are sure to come."

Ten days after the wedding, his bosom friend Rammanohar**bhai**

<sup>1</sup>*guru patni*: Wife of a teacher

invited us over to his home for lunch. *Rambhai* had also been a student at Shantiniketan. Both of them had been the pupils of Acharya<sup>2</sup> Nandlal Bose. *Rambhai*'s home was three kilometres away from ours. I hoped that my husband would hire a rickshaw. But by now I had started knowing him to some extent, so I shook off that hope. And I was right to do so. We walked the three kilometres through the market, and walked all the way back after lunch. And I was still a newlywed!

One day I saw him grinding the wheat into flour on a *chakki*<sup>3</sup> along with my mother-in-law. My father-in-law was a staunch Gandhian. Both my father-in-law and mother-in-law would wear only *khadi*<sup>4</sup>. Even the carpet and the mosquito-nets were made from *khadi*. The family ate *rotis* made only with hand-ground flour. Earlier, it was my father-in-law who would do the grinding, but when my husband returned from Shantiniketan, he along with my mother-in-law relieved my father-in-law from this chore. When I came into the family, I took over from my mother-in-law. Now both my husband and I together do the task of grinding the wheat.

My respected father-in-law and mother-in-law are now no more, but we have continued this system of making hand-ground flour right up to the present day. My face turns red while grinding and my husband says, "How beautiful you look!" I reply, "Stop it. I know your trick of extracting work out of me."

About 15 days after the wedding, my brother came to take me back to Chaibasa for a visit. He had seen me doing the household chores in my new home all day long. He noticed that there was no furniture in the house—there was not even a radio. During the journey to my parents' home he tried to comfort me, but I reassured him saying, "I am not at all unhappy. I am very happy in every respect." How few are the requirements of young couples!

<sup>2</sup>Acharya: The title given to a Hindu religious or spiritual teacher

<sup>3</sup>*chakki*: A traditional hand-mill made of stone

<sup>4</sup>*khadi*: Made of hemp, the fabric *khadi* has enormous significance in India. It became the symbol of self-reliance in a movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi as a part of the non-violent fight for India's independence from the British. The British would buy cloth cheaply in India, export it to Britain (the UK) and stitch it into garments which would then be imported back into India and sold at exorbitant prices. Gandhi organised a boycott of the imported goods and encouraged the local production of *khadi*, using the spinning wheel himself to spin the yarn. The spinning wheel too became a symbol of India's struggle for self-determination and freedom from British rule

About two months later, my husband came to take me back to Jabalpur. He arrived sometime during the night and so had to sleep in a guest room built in the courtyard. In the morning, my brother had to go to Jamshedpur. He took my husband with him. As they returned late, my husband once again had to sleep in the guest room. The next morning, my brothers had to go to the manganese mines. Once again they took my husband with them. Once again he was in that guest room for that night. We had not been able to meet for two days!

This was because during my father's days, a strict rule had to be followed by all. Men did not come into the inner part of the house and the women did not come out. But on third day my husband threw the protocol and came inside the house!

Whenever we were apart after getting married, we would write letters to each other. His letters would, however, first come into the hands of my sister Gauri. She was only two years younger than I, but very mischievous. She would open the envelope, read the letter, then read it again aloud in front of my family. She would repeatedly read the romantic lines aloud, and only then would she give the letter to me. Apart from my three *bhabhis*<sup>5</sup>, my mother would also be present. I would get very embarrassed. But in my heart of hearts, I was pleased that he loved me so much.

My husband had studied in Shantiniketan, which is in West Bengal. Bengali girls wear hoop earrings. I used to wear earrings that were in the traditional Gujarati pattern of a flower motif. He wanted to see me wear the hoop earrings. So he started saving up money from his monthly salary. When the amount was sufficient to buy the earrings, we went to a jewellery shop. Noticing the love between us, the shopkeeper discounted the price. Not only did my husband put the earrings on my ears himself, but he also made many sketches of me wearing them.

I am a reasonably good cook. I can prepare good *idlis*<sup>6</sup> and *dosas*<sup>7</sup> but my husband would say, "You can't make *dhoklas*<sup>8</sup> as good as my mother

<sup>5</sup>*bhabhi*: (Plural: *bhabhis*) Wife of an elder brother

<sup>6</sup>*idli*: (Plural: *idlis*) A steamed, circular dumpling made of ground and fermented lentils and rice, both of particular varieties. It is a South Indian snack, popular across India and often eaten for breakfast

<sup>7</sup>*dosa*: (Plural: *dosas*) A crepe-like pancake from South India made of ground and fermented rice and black lentils, with an optional potato filling

<sup>8</sup>*dhokla*: (Plural: *dhoklas*) A steamed Gujarati snack made with fermented batter from ground rice and split chick peas

used to." Every mother makes an item which her sons or daughters like immensely, and think that no one else in the world can prepare that particular item better than mother.

Once, when our second son Dilip was about five years old, my husband took him to the weekly bazaar. Dilip somehow got lost in the crowd. My husband could not find him despite his best efforts. He was in tears and came running home. We were all very worried. Both my *devars*<sup>9</sup> left on bicycles to search Dilip. We all waited outside—no one wanted to go inside the house.

About half an hour later, a rickshaw-puller arrived. He had brought Dilip home in his rickshaw. He lifted Dilip from the rickshaw and put him down. We were all overjoyed. My husband embraced Dilip and started crying. He wept and wept. Meanwhile, the rickshaw-puller had left unnoticed. When my husband realised that he had left, he felt extremely sorry that he did not reward that angel-like rickshaw-puller.

My husband tends to be very sentimental. He gets all choked up if there is any pathetic occurrence or tragic event. His eyes fill with tears. When he is upset he can neither read nor speak. I don't shed tears so easily. I can't cry over minor matters.

My husband also used to help me in my housework. Now our *devrani*<sup>10</sup> and our daughter-in-law also help out, so the burden of housework on us has eased. Earlier, he used to make the children's beds, rinse out the washed clothes and carry water in a bucket while I cleaned the floors. He also helped me in writing this article by systematically organising what I had drafted. Truth be told, he should also be credited as the co-writer of this article. But its title is such that only my name can appear. I too help him in his work. My role is to keep encouraging him while he is working.

I would like to recount an incident to show the extent to which I have been influenced by him, having lived with him for so long. It happened after 40 years of marriage. In our hometown, Jabalpur, there are three main *ghats* of the Narmada: Gwarighat, Tilwaraghat and Bheraghat. Bheraghat is very famous. At Tilwaraghat, a big fair is celebrated every

<sup>9</sup>*devar*: (Plural: *devars*) Husband's younger brother

<sup>10</sup>*devrani*: Husband's younger brother's wife

year on the occasion of *Makar Sankranti*.<sup>11</sup> One day he announced, "I am going to see the fair at Tilwaraghat."

I said, "I will also go along."

"But I will go on foot," he said.

"I will also walk," I told him.

Tilwaraghat is about 10 kilometres from our home. I set out on foot with him. It was biting cold. We had planned to return by tempo or bus. But people were crowding into them and had we tried to board, we would have been crushed. So we set out once again on foot, this time coming home. We had covered half the distance when, after lot of difficulty, we got a rickshaw for the rest of the way. I had walked about 16 kilometres in one day at the age of 60! Walking has become a part of our life's rhythm.

It is not that we do not disagree. At times we do quarrel. But that does not affect our love. We have learnt to rise above petty matters. We love each other without losing our own identities.

## 2

My husband is primarily an artist, but loves writing too. He is equally adept at writing in both Hindi as well as Gujarati.

He is careless about his attire, but extremely meticulous when it comes to writing or painting. He would not be interested in shopping for a scooter, a fridge, a TV set or a bed, but when it comes to buying paper, envelopes, drawing paper or ink, he insists on making the purchase himself. He handwrites his articles and letters in a beautiful, clear script and takes care to mail them himself. He does not trust anybody else in these matters.

He works very hard. He writes and re-writes each article five or six times, making several changes. He says, "Just as my body has no fat, my articles too are fatless." He works very hard on his art too. For the last 20 years, he has specialised in making collages. A collage is an artwork created by pasting certain materials on a base. My husband uses only paper for his collages. Sometimes it takes him a month to complete a small collage

<sup>11</sup>*Makar Sankranti*: A harvest festival, which falls in mid-January when the sun moves away from the Tropic of Capricorn towards the Tropic of Cancer. It is celebrated throughout India under different names. It marks the shift from darkness to light, signified by the longer hours of daylight



because he makes several alterations to achieve the final effect. His collages of the Narmada circumambulation have become famous. For that body of work he has been awarded the Madhya Pradesh government's prestigious Shikhar Samman.

While making a collage, he asks me for my comments. Due to my long association with him, I have also developed some knowledge of art. If I make a suggestion, he agrees, and announces to everyone: "This is my one-woman censor board. I show my art to others only after she (Kanta) okays my work." Everybody says that his artworks reflect my face.

## 3

He began his travels along the banks of the Narmada in 1977. The first lap was from Jabalpur to Mandla. With him were three of his students. For 10 days there was no news of them. I was cleaning the courtyard when my father-in-law, who was reading the morning newspaper, suddenly said, "Take a look at this&read it."

The newspaper had reported that in the forest near Mandla, a tiger had attacked and eaten two circumambulators. They were a *guru* and his pupil. As I read the news my father-in-law said, "Daughter-in-law, why did you allow him to go? He went only because you allowed him to go. At this age, this is a terrible blow to me." I was also very frightened, but with an outward display of courage I said, "If he wants to do something good, how can I stop him? Nothing will happen to him. Mother Narmada will protect him."

Somehow I got through the day but I just could not sleep that night. Early in the morning one of his acquaintances came bearing news of him. What a relief that was! Next day his letter too arrived. He had written the letter much earlier, but it had arrived late.

My husband has shown me many of the sights of the Narmada. When an exhibition of his art was arranged, he took me to Maheswar and Omkareswar. His book, *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada (Narmada—River of Beauty)*, was awarded the Padumlal Punnalal Bakshi All India award by the Madhya Pradesh Sahitya Parishad. To receive the award we were to go to Bhopal. On the way, we stopped at Hoshangabad. I saw the famous Sethanighat.

Earlier, we had gone to Barman Ghat. Travelling in a friend's car, we had also been to Amarkantak, Dindori and Mandla. My husband has shown me almost all the important places along the banks of the Narmada including Mithitalai, where the Narmada meets the sea.

His works were exhibited in Calcutta, Mumbai and Delhi. He did not go alone: he took me along to all the places where he was exhibiting. He also took me to Shantiniketan twice and showed me, with love and interest, each and every corner of the place. Finally, he took me to the well of Kala Bhavan. "Before leaving Shantiniketan for the last time," he told me, "I bathed at this well. I kept pouring bucket after bucket of water over my body. My stream of tears mingled with the water."

I had gone to Kutch with our son Sharad and his wife Archana. On our way back, we were to go to Surat. My husband told me, "Do meet Vishnu Prasad Trivediji when you are in Surat. Convey my regards to him." Trivediji was a great scholar of Gujarati literature. He had written a letter praising my husband's Gujarati book. Afterwards he also wrote the foreword of the book.

Trivediji's daughter welcomed us. Trivediji was lying on a bed. He rose upon seeing us. Sharad said, "We have come from Jabalpur. My father's name is Amritlal Vegad." On hearing this, Trivediji said to me, "Then you must be Kantaben. Am I right?" My husband's articles on his circumambulation of the Narmada were lying nearby. Pointing at them Trivediji said, "He has written so well. I keep reading his articles again and again."

How happy I felt! I got fame because of my husband's writings. My name had reached here before my own arrival. I was reminded of the story of Ram building a bridge over the sea, and a squirrel becoming famous as a result.

Mumbai's Manju Dagli had written an excellent review of his Gujarati book *Parikrama Narmada Maiya ni (Circumambulation of Mother Narmada)*. When my husband went to meet her, she said, "You have immortalised Kantaben."

Shah Jahan had built the Taj Mahal in memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz and made her immortal, but Mumtaz never knew of it and could not derive any pleasure or pride in being so immortalised. I am so fortunate that I can experience the happiness of being recognised through my

husband's work while I am alive.

He has not forgotten his ecstasy when his first articles on the Narmada *parikrama* were published. In 1977, after his first sojourn from Jabalpur to Mandla, he stopped painting with water colours and began creating collages. A collage is made by arranging and pasting clippings of coloured paper. His collages are like paintings. Everyone wholeheartedly praised his collages.

In those days the Hindi weekly *Dharmayug* was extremely popular. It was my husband's ardent desire to see his collages published in *Dharmayug*. He went to Mumbai (from where *Dharmayug* was published) during the summer vacation of 1978. Luck and friends helped him: eight to 10 of his collages were accepted for publication. Lallaji (Yogendra Kumar Lalla, a member of the editorial team) said, "We will not publish only the collages. Accompany them with a description of your travels. Write in detail; we will publish your account in two installments." What more could he have asked for?

On his return home, he wrote and sent two articles to *Dharmayug*. But by the time the issues came, the *Diwali* vacation had started, and it was time for him to leave for the next phase of his journey from Mandla to Amarkantak. There was no chance of getting hold of the issues of *Dharmayug* on the way. He reached Amarkantak about 20 days later. In those days there were only a few huts in the Kalyan Ashram complex. He stayed there, and introduced himself to Baba Kalyan Das, mentioning that an account of his last *parikrama* had been accepted for publication in *Dharmayug* and that it might have been published.

Baba said with composure, "I have read it."

"In one issue or two issues?" my husband almost shouted. He was afraid that both his articles might have been heavily edited and cut to fit into one issue. "In two issues," said Baba Kalyan Das, "with the artwork in colour."

A disciple of the Baba brought both the issues from the Ashram's library. My husband was so excited that he couldn't decide which issue to open first. So he simply embraced both the issues.

In 1978, nobody knew of him. *Dharmayug* had a circulation that ran into lakhs<sup>12</sup>. In such a prestigious magazine, the publication of two of his

<sup>12</sup>lakh: (Plural: lakhs) An Indian/South Asian numerical value equalling 100,000. Ten lakhs is the equivalent of one million

articles of two and half pages each, along with colour reproductions of his collages, was nothing short of a dream come true. On seeing his delight Baba said, "When we hold our *pravachans*<sup>13</sup>, we too feel happy listening to our recorded tapes."

My husband says, "Even though I still feel elated when my article is published, the joy of getting first son is incomparable."

From his very first article, the readers became enamoured with his series. Later, his travel articles began appearing regularly in all the leading newspapers and magazines illustrated with his artwork, sometimes in colour and sometimes in black and white. Some magazines published his writings in series. Finally his book *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada* was published, which proved to be a major landmark in Hindi travelogue.

His second book, *Amritsya Narmada*<sup>14</sup> (the title may be interpreted in two ways: *Amritlal's Narmada* or *Narmada—Giver of Nectar*) was published in a serial form in *Sakshatkar*. Nine articles were published in *Wagarth*, three in *Pahal* and two in *Raviwari Jansatta*, with highly favourable editorial comments. My husband was pleasantly surprised to see that many well-known persons were reading, with keen interest, the travel account of a 'non-writer' as he considered himself. Many readers expressed their appreciation through letters. I would like to quote from some of them as it shows that his travels are now not only his own, but belong to a large community. Few travelogue writers may have had such a partnership with the readers.

Here are the comments from his readers, beginning with a letter from the famous contemporary artist Shri S H Raza, sent from Paris:

"Narmadaji is fully imbedded in my life also. I have gone through your articles with the utmost pleasure and since then, I am desirous of meeting you. My childhood was spent in Mandla, Kanha-Kisli and Kakaiya. Even after so many years in a foreign land, those memories are unforgettable, immortal and active. I plan to visit India again. I have to meet you."

—Raza, Paris

"Such a lively account, filled with folk-life, easy, fluid and touching—if there is another such travel account in Hindi I am not aware of it. The

<sup>13</sup>*pravachans*: Discourses

<sup>14</sup>*Amritsya Narmada*: The book was renamed Narmada: River of Joy by the author for this translated English edition

Narmada circumambulation is not a walk for amusement, but it shows determination. It does not have so much religious zealotry, but expresses a restlessness for the establishment of a close relationship with one's land, river and life. This travel document at times reads like poetry, at other times it shows social alertness; there is an edge of satire and at times, essential public welfare thinking. I was charmed by the first book. These articles have further deepened that charm."

—Prabhakar Shrotriya, Editor, *Wagath*, Kolkata

"You keep sending me printouts of your travel articles. Do you think I leave even a word written by you unread? Of all the meaningful articles that are published in *Sakshatkar*, I rate your descriptions the highest. I have read many installments several times. I have read *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada* so many times, that I feel I myself have done the circumambulation."

—Vishnu Khare, Delhi

"Your prose is so lively and unique, that keeping it within the framework of a travel account is like deliberately limiting it. This travel account has all the attributes of a great story and a great epic. They are so inbuilt with human warmth that they simultaneously touch several aspects of literature. This is a rare gift to Hindi literature."

—Kumar Ambuj, Guria

"I am an admirer of your travelogues and your sketches. I read them with utmost respect and remember them. I wish to acquire your facility with language and art creations, so that I too may write something, sometime."

—Leeladhar Mandloi, Delhi

"I do not think these writing disciplines (the essay form, travel account, biography, autobiography, diary, etc) are disappearing. Fortunately many writers like Amritlal Vegad are still in our midst."

—Arun Kamal, Patna

"Your descriptions and paintings were highly appreciated by our readers in *Raviwari*. I too went through your book. In this way, I too circumambulated the Narmada."

—Om Thanvi, Editor, *Jansatta*, Delhi

"Inspired by you, we are thinking of jointly travelling along the Shivrath River . . . the Narmada will certainly feel proud of her son."

—Kanak Tiwari, Durg

"I feel as if I am also circumambulating the Narmada with you. The crow episode is very interesting. You have explained the difference between nature and culture in a masterly style. There are no such travel accounts of rivers in Hindi. You are exceptional in this area."

—Dr Kantikumar Jain, Sagar

"Dada, Dada—no, if I say 'Traveller Dada', it would be more appropriate, because your travels are more deeply internal than external. I think when you go into details, you define things extremely well. For example let us take 'Time': when did this era start, when did time start, when did earth begin its circumambulation (around the sun) . . . since then . . . a very beautiful essay."

—Hari Bhatnagar, Assistant Editor, *Sakshatkar*, Bhopal

"If Adi Shankaracharya was the first minstrel of the Narmada, then you are the modern panegyrist. The way you have described life on the banks of the Narmada reminds me of a unique book by the world-renowned and Nobel Prize-winning Russian novelist, Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*. The Kazaks residing on the banks of the Don and the Bhils residing along the Narmada banks have become one form, one colour. The attraction of this series of articles was so compelling that I kept floating through it like a falling leaf borne by the wind. I experienced not only coolness but purity too! The Narmada now flows in my heart—like an eternal stream of consciousness."

—Dinesh Thakur, Kanker

"By writing this serial, you have justified the saying that one should, in one's life, do something which others have failed to do. Thousands complete the Narmada's circumambulation, but no one has given one's experiences in the form of a book. These travels have converted an artist into a writer."

—Ramesh Nayyar, Raipur

"Your articles are like colossal murals of culture."

—Dharampal Akela, Hapud

"Read one portion of the Narmada circumambulation in *Sakshatkar*, then had to read it three or four more times. You have painted everything in such a lively manner that many times it appears as if we are also with you in your travels. I have written some poems on your circumambulation that have been published in *Ravivari Jansatta*."

—Shatrughan Chaturvedi, Sagar

"What can I say? Reading Vegadji's travel account in *Wagarth*, I suddenly started crying. At first, I could not understand why I was crying. These are no sad episodes. Later I realised it was the Narmada's holy water which started flowing through my eyes. It is such a powerful work."

—Sudha, Pondicherry

"There is so much passion in it. The beauty of the Narmada quivers. You have certainly done a useful job for Hindi literature. It will linger on in the memory for a long time."

—Suchesh Karna, Saharsa

"Vegadji's *parikrama* account has a second presence—of poetry in prose."

—Ekant Shrivastava, Vishakhapatnam

"I was repeatedly looking at your travel article printed in *Wagarth*—but kept postponing reading it due to lack of time. I might have lived without reading it, but I could not have slept. So I could not help going through it completely. But now, after reading it, I will still not be able to sleep. I will see you and your beautiful river in my dreams."

—Khalid, Guna

"For years, I have been searching for and reading your travel literature. Will you not now write even a word? Why? Do not think you will be able to retire from writing just like that. An emotional relationship has been

established between you and your readers and we want to make it stronger. Do not stop writing."

—Satyendra Trivedi, Patna

"Your writing has the effect of a rejuvenating drug. Your travelogue is a cultural history of the river's banks."

—Anoop Sethi, Mumbai

"The pearl of beauty is not born in a beauty parlor, but in the shell of hard labor." Such a sentence can emerge only from the self-energised, incessant, irresistible writing of the indomitable traveller on foot, Vegadji."

—Rambadan Rai, Gazipur

"Such mastery and yet such simplicity in language is now rarely seen. My grandmother (. . .) is reading your book with the same concentration of a person who repeats the couplets from the *Ram Charit Manas*."

—Alok Puranik, Delhi

"Your travel account tickles at one place and makes one cry at another. Your sense of humour is astonishing."

—Krishnakumar Santhalia, Kolkata

"I once had an opportunity to see Dhuandhar and Bandarkudni. When I read your descriptions in *Wagarth*, I realised that then I had only seen them; but now I have known and understood them. This account has generated new courage in me."

—Susheel Kanti, Kanchrapada (West Bengal)

"Publishing your travel accounts is an achievement for any magazine. You gave this honour to *Wagarth*, for which I am grateful to you. Many letters praising your articles are pouring in."

—Prabhakar Shrotriya, Editor, *Wagarth*, Kolkata

These letters are only a few of the many my husband has received. For him, letters from readers are most enjoyable. It is as if the readers were

walking along with him like invisible co-travellers. These letters also tell him that there are people out there who identify with his writing. He says, "At the time of writing my account, I was apprehensive, wondering whether readers would like it. I may have started repeating an old account, but these letters have removed my doubts. These unexpected letters are my best gifts."

Once, my husband faced a ridiculous situation. Bhopal Doordarshan had prepared a 20-minute documentary on him. The evening before the day it was to be aired, he set out on its publicity campaign. Suddenly a phone call came from Bhopal that the programme would be aired that day itself. Now where could we go looking for him? All of us watched the documentary on him, except my husband himself. How could he have watched the programme? At that time he was busy beating a drum in the city! But we recorded it. At the end of the documentary, both of us are shown grinding the wheat.

For all the colleges of Madhya Pradesh, there is a compulsory Hindi text titled *Bharatiyata ke Amar Swar* (*The Immortal Voices of Indianism*), for first year students. One of the essays is that of Amritlal Vegadji. The essay is an excerpt from *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada*. He remarked, "In this book I am there along with Nirala, Prasad, Premchand and Harishankar Parsai. All have passed away. Perhaps the editors have a premonition that I am also going to kick the bucket soon."

For all his achievements, he gives credit to his *alma mater* Shantiniketan. "If I had not studied there," he once remarked, "then there would have been no journeys such as the ones I took, nor the artworks that I have created, nor these books that I have written."

I said, "Thousands of students must have passed out from Shantiniketan by now. Did all of them travel or write books?"

He retorted, "This is a bad argument."

I said, "Let me give you a bad argument today. You had the seed in you. Shantiniketan gave that seed manure and water. If there had been no seed, then what good could the manure and water have done? Credit goes to both, the seed and the inputs."

He said, "Only a Shankarcharya can beat you in a debate."

I replied, "This is a bad argument!"

## 4

He is a good speaker too. He strides towards the microphone as if he is going to the ceremonial dais of a swayamvara<sup>15</sup>. He speaks with an economy of words, for no more than six or seven minutes, but he speaks so well that the audience is spellbound.

At the time of receiving the Shikhar Samman award he said:

"I consider the Narmada a river of beauty. I have given this name to my book. You are well aware that this is an era of beauty contests. If a beauty contest of India's rivers is held, the first prize will go only to the Narmada. The only aim of my life is to publicise and advertise the beauty of the Narmada. The purpose is huge and my power is limited. I may not be successful, but trying a good deed even if one does not succeed is also good. Ravan was successful in abducting Sita, while Jatayu<sup>16</sup> was unsuccessful in stopping him. But Jatayu's failure is thousand times better than Ravan's success."

Among the listeners was Vinod Kumar Shukla (an award-winning contemporary Hindi writer). Praising my husband, he said he truly felt the author of *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada* was speaking.

The high school of our city, Jabalpur, where my husband had studied, organises a major ceremony every year on the occasion of Teachers' Day. Among the former students of this school are renowned doctors, engineers and industrialists. Once they invited my husband to be the chief guest. He opened his address with these words:

"I am very happy today. Happy because you invited me to this grand ceremony and made me your chief guest. And I am even happier because my wife is also present. The thing is that my wife thinks I am a fool. I feel that each wife thinks that her husband is a fool. Today I want my wife to see how respected I am outside my home. She must stop thinking that I am an idiot. This ordinance is promulgated with immediate effect."

<sup>15</sup>swayamvara: A ceremony where a princess of marriageable age publicly chooses her husband from among several suitors

<sup>16</sup>Jatayu: A demi-god mentioned in the epic, the Ramayana, who took on the form of a vulture. Jatayu is said to have fought valiantly with the demon-god Ravan in an attempt to prevent the latter's abduction of Sita, the wife of Ram, but failed and was fatally injured in the process. When Ram found the stricken and dying bird, Jatayu, in a final act of service, pointed in the direction that Ravan had taken Sita

Everyone laughed. One person remarked, "People had forgotten how to laugh. You have taught them to laugh again."

My two *devars* are high ranking government officers. The middle brother-in-law is an engineer in Bhilai and had been to Russia. The younger brother-in-law has been in New Zealand for three years and was in U.S.A for one year. Both are very respectful towards their eldest brother. When my father-in-law died, all the brothers and sisters came together. Both the brothers said, "Father has gone. Now you have to take our father's place and take care of us." Hearing this, my husband was overwhelmed; he could not say a word. On such occasions, though, his humorous nature helps him. He later said, "You can appoint me temporarily to this post. If you are satisfied with my work, then you can make me permanent."

About 20 years ago when my father-in-law had divided the family bungalow into three parts, his brothers had insisted, "Give the bigger part to our eldest brother, he has the larger family." And so we got the bigger portion. My husband says, "In these times, where can one find such brothers?"

Once we were having our meal. Our granddaughter Neha was playing nearby. My husband asked her to bring him some buttermilk. Neha was four years old, and did not want to leave her game. When he asked her again for the buttermilk, she got irritated and said, "You got it once; you will not get it again."

My husband burst out laughing. Then our daughter-in-law came by. Still laughing, he said to her, "I laughed because it was Neha who said it. If you had said the same thing, it would have been very insulting to me. The action may be same but if the doer changes, then the result will also change. An action does not have the same result every time."

There are some habits of his I do not like. His careless attire displeases me. He wears his pyjama pants high, and pulls it up even higher above his ankles during the rains. He's a bit old-fashioned, and does not call me by my name. Earlier he was short-tempered. He would say, "My father was short-tempered. What a relief it is to see that our ancestors had the same vices. We feel that we are 'not guilty'."

He cannot bear the cold. He says, "Just hearing the very word 'cold' I start shivering."

Our teeth are not as strong as they were before; at some stage we may need dentures. My husband suggested, "We can share one set of dentures as it will save money and be a symbol of our deep love."

Once he lived only on buttermilk (*matha*) for 24 days. Punning on the Hindi form of the word, he would tell everyone, "These days I am a *mathadheesh*<sup>7</sup>."

When my brother-in-law's kids were young, they were very attached to us. Many people thought that they were our own children. Today four of my granddaughters are more attached to my *devrani*. Ours is a joint family, formerly of 15 and now of 21 members, including the young and the old. At times minor problems may arise, but they do not affect our mutual love. All this has been possible due to God's grace.

My husband's book *Soundarya ki Nadi Narmada* was highly acclaimed. It won two awards, one regional and the other national. He had translated the same book into Gujarati as well. The response to the Gujarati edition was tremendous. It was awarded the first prize by the Gujarat Sahitya Academy and the Kaka Kalekar award by the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. As mentioned earlier, for his body of artwork he had won the Madhya Pradesh Government's prestigious Shikhar Samman ('Top of the Peak') award.

It was natural to feel happy about these awards. But one day he said, "I last travelled on the banks of the Narmada about nine years ago. These awards and recognitions are the result of those travels but it is like surviving on the interest of the principal money which I had earned. Should I not do something new, or should I remain content with just the interest?" And that was how in November 1996, at the age of 69 years, after an interval of nine years he set out again on the Narmada *parikrama* and completed the remaining section of the circumambulation.

Once, on his return from the Narmada walk, he stopped reading newspapers. (Quitting newspapers is very easy for him. He has done it twice before.) He said, "We have a tradition of abandoning something disgusting in a place of pilgrimage. I have abandoned the newspaper. A newspaper is disgusting to me. What else does it have except dirt and scandals?"

During our 45 years together I have seen various facets of him. I have seen him happy, angry and dejected; I have seen him crying and laughing

<sup>7</sup>*mathadheesh*: Head of a monastery

loudly. He is not mentally tough. He exaggerates too much and can be full of self-praise. If I try to restrain him, he says, "I do not condemn anyone. Self-praise is better than abusing others."

So this is my husband: simple, upright, emotional and soft-hearted. Looking at this unassuming and timid man I wonder, how could he have achieved the 2,624-kilometre circumambulation of the Narmada which is so dangerous and difficult? Even more astonishing is the realisation that he has actually walked far more than that distance: if one includes his walks along the tributaries of the Narmada, he has actually done a total of 4,000 kilometres on foot.

Wishing me on my 60th birthday, he said, "Even today your charm has not lessened. Only your beauty has slipped down from your face to your heart."

As I said, exaggeration is his favorite garnish.

One day he remarked, "My father expired at the age of 87 years in good shape. Mother left early. Even then, my lifespan comes to 80 years. Like an obedient son, I must live up to 80 years. If I too go earlier, then it would be due to my sins." In his next remark he said just the opposite: "This year I cheated the winter somehow, but next year it will not spare me."

I numbly told him, "I don't like to hear such things. Why do you have to mouth such inauspicious words?" To this he replied, "Death is not a sparrow, which comes at a call. It will come when it wishes, not a moment earlier, nor a moment later." He followed up this remark with, "This is the only journey which is done without a map, and that is the best attraction of this journey."

On another occasion he said, "If I go before you, then you must remain as you are today. Wear your *bindi*<sup>18</sup>, bangles, *mangalsutra*<sup>19</sup> and

<sup>18</sup>*bindi*: Traditionally, a *bindi* is a dot of vermillion powder applied to the centre of a woman's forehead just above the line of the eyebrows. It is used by Hindu women as much for its religious significance as a form of adornment. The position of the *bindi* is over the psychic Third Eye, which is said to have mystical powers of vision and perception. A widow, according to traditional custom, was expected to wipe off the *bindi* from her forehead upon the death of her husband

<sup>19</sup>*mangalsutra*: Literally, *mangal* means 'holy' or 'auspicious' and *sutra* means 'thread'. The traditional *mangalsutra* is a gold chain with black beads which, during the wedding ceremony, a Hindu groom 'ties' around the neck of his bride, signifying her married status. Traditionally, it is worn as long as the husband is alive

colourful saris (all symbols of a married Hindu woman). If you quit any of these things, my soul will be tormented. And if you go earlier, then I do not have anything to quit."

Then he said, "If I have received my pension for 20 years, after I am gone you must receive my pension for 30 years. During my 35 years of government service, those rascals did not give me a single promotion. We must take our revenge."

No one knows when death will come. We do not know who will depart first. According to the 'ladies first' rule I would like to go earlier. Every married Indian woman wants to die a *suhagan*<sup>20</sup>. My husband though says, "How would death dare to take you away while I am alive."

Well, this is jokingly said, but one thing is definite, In my next birth—and in every birth thereafter—my address will remain the same: "Kanta Vegad, c/o Amritlal Vegad!"



<sup>20</sup>*suhagan*: A married woman whose husband is still alive



## Glossary

(in alphabetical order)

**Acharya** – The title given to a Hindu religious or spiritual teacher

**Adi Shankararcharya** – A Hindu philosopher (circa early 8th century AD) who hailed from Kerala in South India. He consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, a school of Vedic philosophy and religious practice, travelling throughout the Indian sub-continent to propagate his philosophical teachings

**Ahilyabai** – Queen Ahilyabai Holkar (1725-1795) ascended the throne of the erstwhile kingdom of Malwa (of which Maheswar was the capital) following the deaths of her husband and father-in-law. She built several temples and dharamsalas, both in and beyond her kingdom

**Ajanta Caves** – These are 300 rock-cut cave monuments in Aurangabad in the state of Maharashtra that date back from the 2nd century BC to the 5th or 6th century AD, with sculptures and paintings that have been hailed as the finest examples of Buddhist art in India. The Ajanta Caves are a UNESCO World Heritage site

**Akbar** – A Mughal emperor known as Akbar the Great (1542-1605) whose power and benign influence extended beyond his kingdom to the entire Indian subcontinent. He was known for his unifying policies and excellent administration

**Akshay Trutiya** – One of the four most holy days observed by devout Hindus, Akshay Trutiya falls on the third lunar day of the bright half (Shukla Paksha) of the Hindu month of Vaishakha (or Vaisakhi) which straddles the months of April and May. It celebrates the birth of Lord Parshurama who is believed to be the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is believed that it was on this day that the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, began to be written by Ved Vyas and Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed god

**Amarkantak** – The place which is the source of the Narmada. It is located in the Maikal Hills, the meeting point of the two mountain ranges, the Vindhya and the Satpuras at the eastern edge of Madhya Pradesh. Amarkantak is a pilgrim town in a natural heritage area

**Amavasya** – The night of no moon

**Anjan** – Native to India, the anjan is a deciduous tree that belongs to the family of gul-mohur

**Annakut** – Celebrated the day after Diwali, it is a Hindu festival commemorating the lifting of the Govardhan Mountain by Lord Krishna with his little finger. He held it up for seven days to protect the cows and people of Vrindavan (now in the state of Uttar Pradesh) against the deluge of rain sent by Indra, god of the heavens and rains. Annakut is also celebrated as a festival of food

**Annapurna** – Literally translating into 'full of food', the name is usually taken to mean

'the goddess of harvests'

**Arahar dal** – A variety of pulses also known as 'pigeon pea'

**Arjun** – The third of the Pandava brothers and the only undefeated hero of the Mahabharata. It was Arjun to whom Lord Krishna addressed his philosophical and theological discourse, recorded in the Bhagwad Gita

**Arjuna** – A tall wide-canopied tree, it is found in south and central India, and in West Bengal. It grows well on river banks and has medicinal properties

**Asanas** – Yogic postures

**Ashram** – A hermitage; a place of religious retreat for Hindus

**Ayurvedic** – The word is the adjectival form of ayurveda, an ancient Indian science of healing. Ayurveda uses herbs, minerals, water, yoga and meditation among other means of remedy. This traditional form of healing is considered to be an alternative to conventional allopathic practice

**Baba** – An honorific, sometimes added to the name of a person to show respect

**Bael** – Also known as the wood apple tree, it is native to India and considered sacred

**Bajra** – Pearl millet, a type of cereal grain

**Barman** – A town in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh

**Bhabhi** – Wife of an elder brother

**Bhagwad Gita** – Also referred to as the Gita, it is a 700-verse scripture recording the philosophical and theological discourse by Lord Krishna to the Pandava warrior prince Arjun. The Gita forms a major part of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata. It is revered as the holy book of the Hindus

**Bhai** – Literally 'brother'; appended to a name as a sign of respect and affection when addressing a close friend or relative

**Bharat** – A younger brother of Ram. Bharat's scheming mother, King Dashrath's third wife, Kaikeyi, had persuaded the king to exile Ram, the crown prince, for 14 years so that her son Bharat could be the heir to the throne. Bharat was unwilling to usurp the throne upon Dashrath's death and asked Ram, who was determined to uphold his father's decision to exile him, to give him his sandals to place on the throne as a symbol of his presence for the period of exile

**Bhils** – A tribal community found mainly in central India, in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra

**Bhima** – The second of the five Pandava brothers, the warrior princes who feature in the Indian epic, the Mahabharata

**Bindi** – Traditionally, a bindi is a dot of vermilion powder applied to the centre of a woman's forehead just above the line of the eyebrows. It is used by Hindu women as much for its religious significance as a form of adornment. The position of the bindi is

over the psychic Third Eye, which is said to have mystical powers of vision and perception. A widow, according to traditional custom, was expected to wipe off the bindi from her forehead upon the death of her husband

**Brahmachari** – A religious novice; one who undertakes several years of study of the classical Hindu texts and scriptures prior to religious initiation. A brahmachari also vows to remain celibate for life

**Brahmacharyashram** – The student stage in one's life

**Brahmarshri** – A member of the highest order of rishis or sages, who has grasped the ultimate in divine knowledge. Brahmarshis are credited with the composition of the hymns of the Rig Veda, an ancient text containing a sacred collection of verses in praise of Hindu deities

**Chabutra** – A tower-like structure crowned with a carved canopy held up by small pillars where birds—usually pigeons—can nest, feed and breed. At a lower level, the tower is surrounded by a circular platform where people can sit. Chabutras are found mainly in the villages of Gujarat and Rajasthan, usually at the entrance of a village or at its centre

**Chakki** – A traditional hand-grinder made of stone

**Chanod** – Considered to be one of the most sacred towns in the state of Gujarat, Chanod is known for its meticulous observance of Hindu death rituals

**Chappati** – Unleavened bread, circular in shape. It is a staple of Indian meals and eaten with sides dishes

**Charan** – A caste believed to have descended from the divine

**Charudatta** – The central character of Shudrak's 10-act Sanskrit drama *Mrichkatik*. In the play, Charudatta is an impoverished Brahmin in love with a wealthy courtesan

**Chaturmas** – The four holy months from July to September, observed by pious Hindus. It is believed to have been a period of deep meditation by Lord Vishnu. July to September is also the monsoon season in India

**Chaubis Avatar** – Literally, '24 incarnations'

**Chausat Yogini Temple** – A temple depicting 64 (or sometimes many more) yoginis carved in stone in various poses. There are four such temples in India, two in Madhya Pradesh and two in Odisha

**Chillum** – A conical pipe, originally made of clay and dating back to the 18th century, traditionally smoked by wandering sadhus

**Churning of the Ocean** – A mythological incident where the gods, on the advice of Lord Vishnu, formed an alliance with the demons to churn the Ocean of Milk to extract the nectar of immortality

**Dandi** – A Brahmin philosopher and ascetic master who lived in the woods near Taxila in the Rawalpindi district of present-day Pakistan in the 3rd or 4th century BC. His followers are called Dandi swamis

**Devar** – Husband's younger brother

**Devrani** – Husband's younger brother's wife

**Dev Uthani Ekadashi** – Marking the end of the four-month period of meditation by Lord Vishnu which coincides with the end of the monsoon, the day also heralds the beginning of the auspicious marriage season for Hindus

**Dharamsala** – A religious sanctuary; a resthouse for pilgrims

**Dhava** – A tropical perennial tree native to India that yields timber and gum

**Dhobighat** – An open-air area, usually beside a water body, reserved for laundering clothes by a community of washermen and washerwomen

**Dhokla** – A steamed Gujarati snack made with fermented batter from ground rice and split chick peas

**Dholak** – A two-headed Indian hand-drum

**Dhumradhara** – Literally the 'smoking waterfall'

**Dhumrapapat** – Literally, 'smoke-coloured'

**Diksha** – The initiation of a novice into a religious order, usually after several years of spiritual study and religious practice

**Diwali** – The Hindu festival of lights. It commemorates the return of Lord Ram, the king of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, from 14 years of exile. It also celebrates the victory of good over evil

**Dosa** – A crepe-like pancake from South India made of ground and fermented rice and black lentils, with an optional potato filling

**Draupadi** – The common wife of the five Pandava brothers, the warrior princes mentioned in the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. Originating in the 9th or 8th century BC, the final form of the Mahabharata, the longest Sanskrit epic, is said to have been completed in the 4th century AD (See Mahabharata below)

**Dussehra** – One of the most important Hindu festivals in India, celebrating the triumph of good over evil by commemorating Lord Ram's victory over the demon king Ravan. Ravan (or Ravana) is said to have had 10 heads, and 'dussehra' literally means 'removal of 10'

**Eklavya** – A prince from a jungle tribe who is a character in the Mahabharata. Rejected as a student by the master archer Drona on account of his low caste, Eklavya erected a statue of Drona and treated it like his guru, practicing and mastering his archery in its presence

**Falahar** – A fruit diet

**Four holy places** – These refer to the most sacred sites for Hindus located at the four 'corners' of India. They are (1) The temple of Lord Vishnu in Badrinath, Uttarakhand, in the north; (2) The temple of Lord Krishna in Dwarka, Gujarat, in the west; (3) The

temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri, Orissa (now Odisha), in the east and (4) the temple of Lord Shiva in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, in the south

**Ganga Saptami** – This marks the day that the holy river Ganga descended to earth. It is observed on the seventh day of the bright phase of the moon (Shukla Paksha) in the Hindu month of Vaisakhi, which corresponds to late April and early May

**Gantantra** – A republic; state rule by the people

**Garba/Ras** – Traditional folk dance of Gujarat

**Ghat** – A flight of steps leading down to a river

**Ghee** – Clarified butter

**Gond** – The second largest tribe in India, believed to be of Dravidian stock

**Gopuram** – A monumental and ornate tower, graduating from a broad base to a narrower crown, usually found at the entrances of temples particularly in the south of India

**Govardhan-Vrindavan** – Govardhan is a sacred hill in the town of Vrindavan in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. It is believed to be the natural form of Lord Krishna

**Grihsthashram** – The householder stage in one's life

**Guru** – A teacher who is an authority on certain subjects and the repository of great knowledge and wisdom, to whom students commit themselves to learn from and serve

**Gurubehen** – A spiritual sister who is a fellow disciple of the same guru

**Gurubhai** – A spiritual brother who is a fellow disciple of the same guru

**Guru patni** – Wife of a teacher

**Haiku** – A form of Japanese short poetry, the haiku is composed of 17 short syllables (a single unit of sound). The content, while appearing deceptively simple, is usually profound

**halva** – An Indian sweet

**Hanuman** – The Indian deity represented as a monkey, who was an ardent devotee of Lord Ram and a key character in the Hindu epic Ramayana

**Haridwar** – Located in the state of Uttarakhand in north India, it is one of the seven holiest places in the country for Hindus

**Idli** – A steamed, circular dumpling made of ground and fermented lentils and rice, both of particular varieties. It is a South Indian snack, popular across India and often eaten for breakfast

**Itkara** – A single-stringed Indian musical instrument

**Indra** – The Hindu 'Lord of the gods', also the god of thunder and lightning, and war

**Jagannath Puri** – The town of Puri in the Indian state of Orissa (now Odisha) where the famous 11th century temple of Lord Jagannath, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, is situated. Puri is often referred to as 'Jagannath Puri' by devotees of Lord Jagannath

**Jammu** – A part of the north Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, located mainly in the Himalayan Mountains

**Jatayu** – A demi-god mentioned in the epic, the Ramayana, who took on the form of a vulture. Jatayu is said to have fought valiantly with the demon-god Ravan in an attempt to prevent the latter's abduction of Sita, the wife of Ram, but failed and was fatally injured in the process. When Ram found the stricken and dying bird, Jatayu, in a final act of service, pointed in the direction that Ravan had taken Sita

**Ji** – Added to a person's name or title to show respect

**Jowar** – Sorghum, a type of cereal grain

**Kakaji** – 'Kaka' refers to one's father's younger brother; 'ji' is added to show respect

**Kalidas** – A classical Sanskrit writer, poet and dramatist of the 4th or 5th century AD, he is considered to be India's greatest litterateur

**Kamandal** – A watering can

**Kangra school** (of painting) – Originating in the mid-18th century, and named after the former princely state in the sub-Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, the Kangra school of painting was known for its exquisite miniature art

**Karnali** – One of the most beautiful and peaceful pilgrimage sites in Gujarat on the Narmada riverbank, also known as the 'Benaras of the South'

**Kartik** – The eighth month of the Hindu calendar which occurs from the second half of October to the first half of November

**Khadi** – Made of hemp, the fabric khadi has enormous significance in India. It became the symbol of self-reliance in a movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi as a part of the non-violent fight for India's independence from the British. The British would buy cloth cheaply in India, export it to Britain (the UK) and stitch it into garments which would then be imported back into India and sold at exorbitant prices. Gandhi organised a boycott of the imported goods and encouraged the local production of khadi, using the spinning wheel himself to spin the yarn. The spinning wheel too became a symbol of India's struggle for self-determination and freedom from British rule

**Kheer** – A sweet rice pudding made with thickened milk

**Khichdi** – Rice cooked with lentils

**King Janak** – According to the myth, King Janak of Mithila, a historical city now partly in India and partly in Nepal, was ploughing a field as part of a yagna, or ritual sacrifice, when he discovered Sita in a furrow. He and his wife Queen Sunayna adopted Sita, who was later married to Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya

**Kirtans** – Sanskrit hymns of praise performed ritually by devotees in call-and-response chants, usually accompanied by Indian musical instruments such as the harmonium, the tabla and mridanga (percussion instruments) and small brass cymbals

**Koel** – The Indian cuckoo

**Koha** – A tree valued for the medicinal properties of its bark, particularly for the treatment of diabetes

**Krishna Paksha** – The reference is to the fortnight of the waning moon, when the moon diminishes in size from the night after the full moon. Paksha literally means 'side' and is used to indicate the dark (Krishna) or bright (Shukla) period on either 'side' of the full moon

**Kumbhakonam** – Literally, 'pitcher's corner'. The allusion is to the kumbh or mythical clay pitcher of the Hindu god Brahma, in which he had placed the seeds of all living beings on earth. The pitcher was said to have been displaced by the dissolution of the universe, and came to rest in the spot where the town now called 'Kumbhakonam' is situated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu

**Kumbh Mela** – The literal meaning is 'pitcher festival'. It refers to the pitcher carried by the Hindu gods from which drops of divine nectar fell into sea after it was churned. Held every three years at the sites of four sacred rivers in turn, the Kumbh Mela attracts the largest number of pilgrims in the world, who believe a dip in the holy river will cleanse them of all sins

**Lakh** – An Indian/South Asian numerical value equaling 100,000. Ten lakhs is the equivalent of one million

**Lal Maa** – Literally, 'Red Mother'

**Lamas** – Tibetan Buddhist monks, usually the high priests

**Lungi** – An unstitched length of cloth worn usually by men and draped like a sarong

**Madanpur** – A census town in the eastern state of West Bengal

**Mahabharata** – One of the two great ancient Indian epics in Sanskrit (the other being the Ramayana—see below), the Mahabharata is a narrative of the Kurukshetra War fought between the warrior princes, the Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas. Its main component is a profoundly philosophical and theological discourse by Lord Krishna addressed to Arjun, one of the Pandavas, on the battlefield. The authorship is attributed to Vyasa, the grandfather of the warring cousins, who was also believed to be a part incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Originating in the 9th or 8th century BC, the final form of the Mahabharata, the longest Sanskrit epic, is said to have been completed in the 4th century AD

**Maharaj** – An honorific, sometimes added to the name of a person to show respect

**Mahatma Gandhi** – Born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), Mahatma (literally, 'great soul') Gandhi propagated non-violence and led the civil disobedience movement that won independence for India from British colonial rule. He is also called the 'Father of the Nation'

**Mahua** – A tree that grows mainly in the forests and plains of north and central India. Its oils are used for cosmetic, food and fuel purposes, and its bark has medicinal properties. The flowers are sweet and used to make an alcoholic drink

**Makar Sankranti** – A harvest festival, which falls in mid-January when the sun moves away from the Tropic of Capricorn towards the Tropic of Cancer. It is celebrated throughout India under different names. It marks the shift from darkness to light, signified by the longer hours of daylight

**Mangalsutra** – Literally, mangal means 'holy' or 'auspicious' and sutra means 'thread'. The traditional mangalsutra is a gold chain with black beads which, during the wedding ceremony, a Hindu groom 'ties' around the neck of his bride, signifying her married status. Traditionally, it is worn as long as the husband is alive

**Mantra** – A sacred verbal formula repeated several times as an incantation, an invocation, a prayer or as a form of meditation to achieve mystical results

**Markandeya** – The descriptor derived from the name of Markandey, an ancient and much revered sage. He was a devotee of both the godly manifestations, Shiva and Vishnu

**Matha** – Buttermilk

**Mathadheesh** – The head of a monastery

**Mauni baba** – A hermit who has taken the vow of silence

**Mother Anandamayi** – Born in poverty as Nirmala Sundari in West Bengal, Mother Anandamayi (1896-1982) or 'Anandamayi Ma' as she was popularly known was so named as she seemed to be in a perpetual state of joy (anand) even in difficult times. She self-initiated into spirituality at the age of 26 on a full moon night, and had a celibate marriage. Her demeanour of constant joy, bliss and ecstasy and her periods of deep meditation which led to spiritual revelations made her into a contemporary saint with many followers drawn to her as the living embodiment of a divine spirit

**Mridanga** – A conical-shaped two-headed drum used for percussion in Indian classical music

**Naga** – A descriptor of the naked sadhus belonging to the Digamber or 'sky-clad' sect. Shunning clothes, they smear holy ash on their bodies instead as part of an elaborate ritual before taking their holy dip

**Nandlal Bose** – Also known as Nandlal Basu (1882-1966). An artist from the Bengal school of art, he was known for his 'Indian' style of painting which was infused with idealism and integrity. He was the principal of Kala Bhavan in Shantiniketan in 1922 and credited as one of the leading artists responsible for the renaissance of art in India

**Narmada Ashtakam** – An anthem to the Narmada composed by the 8th century AD Hindu philosopher Adi Shankararcharya (See Adi Shankararcharya above and Shankararcharya's famous anthem to the Narmada below)

**Narmade Har** – A greeting which translates into 'Praise be to Mother Narmada'

**Neem** – The margosa tree, prevalent all over India and highly valued for its antiseptic and medicinal properties

**Pakshilakkujitum** – Literally, 'a hundred thousand birds warbling'

**Pakshitirtham** – A tirtham is a holy lake or pond; here, it is used in the sense of 'a place of pilgrimage for birds'(pakshi)

**Panchayatan** – A village council, traditionally of five village elders charged with self-governance of the village. The traditional meeting spot for such a council is under a banyan tree

**Panchkoshi** – A five-day walk

**Pandavas** – The five brothers who were warrior princes who feature in the great Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata

**Paramhansi** – A follower of the yogic master, Paramhansa Yogananda. Born as Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1893-1952), he is best known for his classic Autobiography of a Yogi and the fact that his body did not decay upon his death

**Parikrama** – A walk around, or a circumambulation, of a deified structure or place, such as a temple or group of temples, a sacred river, or a sacred hill.

**Parikramavasi** – One who undertakes a parikrama

**Parshurama** – The sixth incarnation of Vishnu who undertook a severe penance to please the god Shiva, and was awarded an ax by Shiva as a reward

**Peepal** – A sacred fig tree prevalent in south-east Asia. It is worshipped by Hindus and is a common feature in temple complexes in India

**Prasad** – An offering, sometimes edible, to a deity which is then kept or consumed by devotees in the belief that it contains the deity's blessing

**Pravachans** – Discourses

**Pulao** – A rice preparation flavoured with a variety of ingredients

**Punditji** – A respectful form of address to a learned person

**Puri** – Unleavened, deep-fried Indian bread

**Raja** – An Indian king

**Rajarshri** – A king who has become a rishi (sage) in his understanding of divine knowledge. A rajarshi does not abdicate his kingship and continues to fulfill his royal duties

**Rajput school of painting** – A unique style of painting that developed in the 16th century in Rajputana, in the region of the present-day state of Rajasthan. It combined both indigenous and foreign influences and used natural colours from stone, shells and plants, and was famous for finely-detailed miniature art works

**Ram** – The crown prince of Ayodhya, a former kingdom in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Ram is believed to be the seventh incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. He was exiled for 14 years by his father King Dashrath on the insistence of the king's third wife Kaikeyi, who wanted her own son Bharat to inherit the throne. Ram, his wife Sita and younger brother Lakshman spent the years of exile in the Dandakaranya Forest. The

Hindu epic Ramayana recounts the story of Ram

**Ramakrishna Paramhans** – Born as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay (1836-1886), he was a Hindu mystic and priest who also practised other religions including Islam and Christianity. He believed that all religions led to one God. He was popularly known as 'Ramakrishna Paramhans' by his disciples. His most famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda, founded the Ramakrishna Mission to spread his religious school of thought

**Ramanandi** – A follower of Ramananda, a Vaishnava saint in medieval India. Ramanandis worship mainly Ram and Vishnu and constitute one of the largest and most egalitarian Hindu sects of India

**Ramayana** – One of the two great Hindu epics in Sanskrit (the other being the Mahabharata), it tells the story of Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, who was exiled for 14 years by his father king Dashrath (see Ram, above). Thematically, the Ramayana explores human values and the concept of dharma, the observance of the divinely-instituted natural order of the universe. The authorship is attributed to the Hindu sage Valmiki, and the generally accepted date of its creation is the 4th century BCE

**Ram Charit Manas** – It literally translates into 'the lake of the deeds of Ram'. It is an epic poem written in seven volumes by the 16th century poet, Goswami Tulsidas (1532-1623), and is a retelling of the Ramayana. The seven volumes correspond to the seven steps leading to the sacred and purifying Himalayan lake, the Mansarovar

**Ram naami** – Inscribed with the name of Lord Ram. On a shawl or a cloth covering, the name 'Ram' in Devnagiri script is printed repeatedly to create a pattern. Such shawls are worn by the devotees of Lord Ram

**Rangoli** – A folk art form of motifs made with coloured rice, dry flour and sometimes flower petals. The motifs are usually drawn on the floor at the entrance of a house to invite good fortune

**Ras and Garba** – Traditional folk dances popular in Gujarat

**Rasgullas** – An Indian sweet, made of cottage cheese, shaped into balls like dumplings and steeped in sugar syrup

**Rishi** – A sage

**Roti** – Indian unleavened bread

**Rudraksh** – An evergreen tree, the seeds of which are strung together to make a necklace used in prayer. The significance of the seed arises from the literal meaning of 'rudraksh' which means 'the eye of Shiva'

**"Ravan rathi, virath Raghuvira"** – This famous line from the epic Ramayana is also interpreted as "Ravan is in a chariot, Lord Ram is on foot". Ravan, the 10-headed demon king, is the antagonist to Lord Ram in the epic

**Sadavrat** – An offering of food to pilgrims, sadhus and the needy. The practice of

sadavrat was introduced by Jalaram Bapa (1799-1881), by way of thanksgiving for the recovery of his sick son

**Sadhu** – A Hindu ascetic, a holy man

**Sahib** – A respectful form of address which means 'master'

**Saja** – Prevalent in central India, the bark of the saja tree is used to heal wounds and boiled to make a decoction to cure diarrhoea. Its fruit is used in the treatment of fever, stomach aches and cholera. Its wood is considered sacred and used to make images of idols

**Salwar-kurti** – A two-piece Indian outfit comprising a short tunic worn over loose trousers shaped like harem pants

**Sanyasi** – A male Hindu religious mendicant; an ascetic

**Sanyasini** – A female Hindu religious mendicant; an ascetic

**Sanyasthashram** – The stage of renunciation in one's life

**Sati** – A Hindu funeral practice in which a newly-widowed woman immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Sati (Sanskrit) is the feminine form of sat, or true, and was a test of true devotion to the dead husband. The practice of sati has been banned by law in India

**Satdhara** – Seven streams

**Satpuras** – A range of hills in central India running roughly parallel to the Vindhyas, from the state of Chhattisgarh, along the borders of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh to the east of the state of Gujarat. The Narmada runs from the east in the depression between the two ranges, finally flowing into the Arabian Sea in the west

**'Saturn Return'** – In horoscopic astrology, it is believed that Saturn returns to the position it occupied in the cosmos at the time of a person's birth every 29.4 years, which is the time the planet takes to orbit around the sun. Its return is said to mark the major transitional milestones in life: from birth to youth, from youth to adulthood and from adulthood to old age

**Savitri** – An epic poem by Sri Aurobindo, it was published in its entirety in book form in two parts in 1950 and 1951. It centres on the theology of the epic, the Mahabharata, highlighting the victory over ignorance and death, and describing man as the 'consummation of terrestrial evolution'. Running to 24,000 lines, it was left unfinished at the time of Sri Aurobindo's death on December 5, 1950

**Shaivites** – Devotees who worship Shiva

**Shankaracharya's famous anthem to the Narmada:** – The reference is to Adi Shankaracharya's composition Narmada Ashtakam (see above). 'Ashtakam' means eight sections. The same music is repeated for each section

**Shantiniketan** – Located in the Birbhum District in West Bengal, Shantiniketan (literally 'abode of peace') is a university town and cultural centre that developed from the vision of the Nobel Laureate poet and litterateur Rabindranath Tagore. It became one

of India's leading hubs for education and the arts

**Sharad Purnima** – A harvest festival celebrated on the night of the full moon in the Hindu month of Ashwin, which falls between September and October. It marks the end of the rainy season

**Shivling** – The male symbol representing the Hindu god Shiva, who is the destroyer of evil

**Shivratri** – The night following the 14 days of the waning moon in the dark fortnight of Phalguna, the Hindu calendar month which falls between February and March, when a festival is held in honour of the god Shiva

**Shudrak** – A Kshatriya king who was a poet and playwright. His exact dates are not known but he is thought to have lived between the 2nd century BC and 5th century AD. He was a devotee of Lord Shiva

**Shukla Pasha** – The reference is to the fortnight of the waxing moon, from the night of the new moon to the night of the full moon. Paksha literally means 'side' and is used to indicate the bright (Shukla) or the dark (Krishna) period on either 'side' of the full moon

**Siddha bakul** – A tree with a dense leafy canopy. It has great religious significance and is often found in Hindu temple grounds. The siddha (literally, 'that which has attained perfection') bakul is said to have sprung up after the planting of a toothpick used by Lord Jagannath (a deity believed to be an incarnation of the god Vishnu). The tree was planted to provide shade to Srila Haridas Thakur, one of the most famous converts to Hinduism from Islam by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a social reformer of the early 16th century in eastern India. Sri Chaitanya had enjoined Srila Haridas Thakur to chant the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, a constant and repetitive chant of the name of the Hindu god Krishna, which amounted to 300,000 chants a day, under the siddha bakul tree. The siddha bakul is also considered to be a wish-fulfilling tree

**STD** – The acronym for Subscriber Trunk Dialling, the facility for long-distance calls

**Sri Aurobindo Ghosh** – An Indian nationalist and freedom fighter, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) was initially engaged in civil works under the Maharaja of Vadodara. A poet, philosopher, spiritual leader and mystic, he founded the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in the south of India, as a retreat and commune for the spiritually-inclined

**Subabool** – A fast-growing, hardy, evergreen tree found mainly in the coastal areas

**Suhagan** – A married woman whose husband is still alive

**Surdas** – A blind mystic poet-singer

**Swami** – A title of respect given to a Hindu religious teacher; an ascetic who is a master

**Swati Nakshatra** – Literally, the 'pure star'. The reference is to one of the 27 stars recognised by Hindu astrology which is a symbol of creativity, art and freedom

**Swayamvara** – A ceremony where a princess of marriageable age publicly chooses her

husband from among several suitors

**Tamasik** – A reference to the lowest group of foods (the higher groups being the pure saatvic and the rich rajasic). Tamasik foods are dry, stale or foul, and are believed to promote the baser instincts in humans

**Tendu** – Found extensively in central India, the tendu tree has leaves that are used to make bidis, the poor man's cigarette

**Tirth** – A place of religious pilgrimage, especially by a river or a lake

**Udasin Order** – Derived from the Sikh religion, it is a religious and ascetic sect founded by Sri Chand (1494-1643), the son of Guru Nanak, the founder and first guru of the Sikh religion. Sri Chand is said to have lived for 149 years, astonishingly retaining his youthful features

**Vanaprasthashram** – The stage of homeless wandering in one's life

**Varun** – The Hindu god of the sky, rain, water and the celestial oceans

**Vasantasena** – A character in the play Mrichkatik

**Vindhyas** – A hilly range cutting across central India that runs westwards from near the Ganges river in the north-east, close to the borders of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan up to the east of the Gujarat peninsula. It effectively divides, along with the parallel Satpura range, the Indian sub-continent into the north and the south

**Yagya** (also yagna) – A ritual sacrifice, performed as a Hindu religious practice, usually for a specific objective

**Yagyashala** – A hall for ritual sacrifices

**Yaksh** – The personification of a divine spirit who had been in the service of King Kubera of the Himalayan kingdom of Alkapuri. According to legend, Yaksh had been banished for a year from Alkapuri by the king as he had neglected his royal duties. Yaksh is said to have sent a message to his wife using a cloud as a messenger

**Yoga** – A physical, mental and spiritual discipline that originated in ancient India and is practiced with the aim of attaining permanent peace

**Yoginis** – Female practitioners of yoga engaged in a spiritual quest

**Yog Vasistha** – An ancient Sanskrit text, written by the sage Valmiki and believed to answer all the questions that arise in the human mind. It is a telling of the discourse between the sage Vasistha and Lord Ram, when the latter was in a state of despair and disillusionment after touring his father's kingdom. Containing profound spiritual truths, the reading of the Yog Vasistha is said to lead to moksha, the ultimate release from the cycle of birth and death. It is the longest ancient Sanskrit text after the Mahabharata. The oldest available manuscript dates back to the 10th century AD

**18th Chapter** – This is the chapter of the Bhagwad Gita titled 'The Final Revelations of the Ultimate Truth', where Lord Krishna sums up all the teachings and philosophical observations of the previous chapters



## NARMADA RIVER OF HOPE

## NARMADA RIVER OF PILGRIMAGE

BOTH THE TITLES BY AMRITLAL VEGAD

Forthcoming . . .

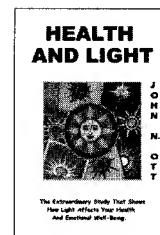
Narmada! You are beautiful, very beautiful.  
Give me a little of your beauty  
So I may share it with others.

Painter-writer Amritlal Vegad and Narmada are synonymus. It is impossible to see Amritlal Vegad and Narmada separately.

In 1977 at the age of 50 he started travelling along the banks of Narmada on foot and by 1999 completed the whole "*parkamma*", though not in one go, but in different part. In 2009 he started again but this time he walked along the banks of tributaries of Narmada. For these 32 years he has walked on foot for more than 4000 k.m.

He has given very engaging account of these journeys in his three books '*Saundarya Ki Nadi Narmada*', '*Amratasya Narmada*', and '*Tire-Tire Narmada*'. In these book he has revealed the immense beauty of Narmada in all its splendour. Interwinded with this is a lively account of the folk-life and folk-culture of the river valley. During his journey he has also captured sketches and made collage too.

The English translation of '*Saundarya Ki Nadi Narmada*', '*Amratasya Narmada*', and '*Tire-Tire Narmada*' is being published by Banyan Tree. Many of his books have been published in Gujarati, Marathi and Bangla.



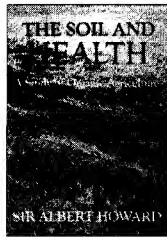
## HEALTH AND LIGHT

The extraordinary study that shows how light affects your health and emotional well-being

JOHN NASH OTT

2012 | 270 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-8-3 | Rs. 350





## THE SOIL AND HEALTH

A Study of Organic Agriculture

SIR ALBERT HOWARD

2013 | 368 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-93-82400-08-0 | Rs. 450

During his years as a scientist working for the British government in India, Sir Albert Howard conceived of and refined the principles of organic agriculture. Howard's *The Soil and Health* became a seminal and inspirational text in the organic movement soon after its publication. *The Soil and Health* argues that industrial agriculture, emergent in Howard's era and dominant today, disrupts the delicate balance of nature and irrevocably robs the soil of its fertility. Howard's classic treatise links the burgeoning health crises facing crops, livestock, and humanity to this radical degradation of the Earth's soil. His message—that we must respect and restore the health of this soil for the benefit of future generations—still resonates among those who are concerned about the effects of chemically enhanced agriculture.

Sir Albert Howard (1873-1947), founder of the organic farming movement, is the author of several books, including *An Agricultural Testament*.

**Contents :** New Introduction by Wendell Berry. Preface. Introduction.

### Part I. The part Played by Soil fertility in Agriculture

1. The operations of Nature 2. Systems of Agriculture 3. The Maintenance of Soil fertility in great Britain 4. Industrialism and the profit motive 5. The intrusion of Science

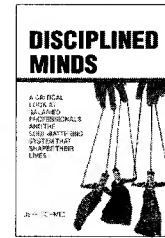
### Part II. disease in present-day farming and gardening

1. Some Diseases of the Soil 2. The Diseases of Crops 3. Disease and health in livestock 4. Soil fertility and human health 5. The Nature of disease

### Part III. The problem of manuring

1. Origins and scope of the problem 2. The indore process and its reception by the farming and gardening worlds 3. The reception of the indore process by the scientists

### Part IV. Conclusions and Suggestions A Final Survey



## DISCIPLINED MINDS

A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives.

JEFF SCHMIDT

2012 | 305 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-2-1 | Rs. 400

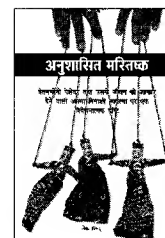
Who are you going to be? That is the question.

In this riveting book about the world of professional work, Jeff Schmidt demonstrates that the workplace is a battleground for the very identity of the individual, as is graduate school, where professionals are trained. He shows that professional work is inherently political, and that professionals are hired to subordinate their own vision and maintain strict "ideological discipline."

The hidden root of much career dissatisfaction, argues Schmidt, is the professional's lack of control over the political component of his or her creative work. Many professionals set out to make a contribution to society and add meaning to their lives. Yet our system of professional education and employment abusively inculcates an acceptance of politically subordinate roles in which professionals typically do not make a significant difference, undermining the creative potential of individuals, organizations and even democracy.

Schmidt details the battle one must fight to be an independent thinker and to pursue one's own social vision in today's corporate society. He shows how an honest reassessment of what it really means to be a professional employee can be remarkably liberating. After reading this brutally frank book, no one who works for a living will ever think the same way about his or her job.

**Contents :** Acknowledgements. Author's preface to Indian Edition. Introduction 1. Timid Professionals 2. Ideological Discipline 3. Insiders, Guests and Crashers 4. Assignable Curiosity 5. The Social Significance Concealment Game 6. The Division of Labor 7. Opportunity 8. Narrowing the Political Spectrum 9. The Primacy of Attitude 10. Examining the Examination 11. Gratuitous Bias 12. "Neutral" Voices 13. Subordination 14. Resisting Indoctrination 15. How to Survive Professional Training with your Values Intact 16. Now or Never. Index.

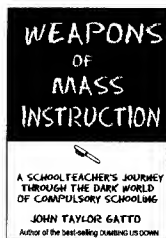


## अनुशासित मस्तिष्क

वेतनभोगी पेशेवर तथा उसके जीवन को आकार देने वाली आत्मा-विनाशी व्यवस्था पर एक विवेचनात्मक दृष्टि

जेफ शिमिट्

2012 | 346 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-1-4 | Rs. 350



## WEAPONS OF MASS INSTRUCTION

A School Teacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

2012 | 264 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-5-2 | Rs. 250

In this book, John Taylor Gatto in his famous storytelling style shows that how forced schooling seduces the trapped into believing us that inert knowledge, memorized fact bits and sequences is the gold standard of intellectual achievements. Learning to connect those bits into meanings for oneself is always discouraged. He further demonstrates that this habit training is a major *Weapon of Mass Instruction* and the harm school inflicts is rational and deliberate.

This book is filled with many real life examples of people who escaped the trap of compulsory schooling at the same age when we were once, sitting at our school desks, copying notes from a blackboard, getting yelled at. *Weapons of Mass Instruction* shows us that realization of personal potential requires a different way of growing up and growing competent, one which Gatto calls "open-source learning," which is of much higher quality than rule-driven, one-size-fits-all schooling.

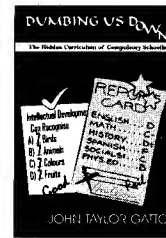
**Contents :** Foreword for Indian Edition. Dedication. Prologue: Against School. 1. Everything you know about School is wrong 2. Walkabout: London 3. Fat Stanley and the Lancaster Amish 4. David Sarnoff's classroom 5. Hector isn't the problem 6. The Camino de Santiago 7. Weapons of Mass Instruction 8. What is Education? 9. A Letter to my Grand Daughter about Dartmouth 10. Incident at Highland High. Afterword: Invitation to an open Conspiracy: The Bartleby Project.

## थोक में गुलाम बनाने का हथियार

अनिवार्य शिक्षा की धिनौनी दुनिया के भीतर एक स्कूली शिक्षक की यात्रा

जॉन टेलर गेट्टो

शीघ्र प्रकाशित . . .



## DUMBING US DOWN

The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

2012 | 148 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-3-8 | Rs. 200

"Gatto comes down hard on the industrial one-size-fits-all schooling model. He argues that not only are schools irrelevant to the lives of children, they are in fact damaging. His central thesis is that factory schooling is causing great harm to children and communities. It is an anti-learning, anti-social and anti-democratic activity."

— Manish Jain, Shikshantar Andolan

Continuous ringing of the bells, from one compartment to another compartment, every day eight hours of confinement, the age-segregation like vegetables, the lack of privacy and constant surveillance, the crazy sequences, cut-off from the working community and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling are designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning—how to think and act—to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

After teaching for years John Taylor Gatto reached to the sad conclusion that schooling has nothing to do with learning—but to teach young people to conform to the economic and social order. *Dumbing Us Down* reveals shocking reality to today's school system and has become a beacon for parents seeking alternatives to it.

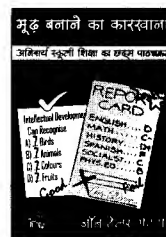
**Contents :** Foreword for Indian Edition, by Manish Jain. Foreword, by Thomas Moore. Introduction, by David Albert. Publisher's Note — from the US Edition. About the Author. 1. The Seven-Lesson Schoolteacher 2. The Psychopathic School 3. The Green Monongahela 4. We Need Less School, Not More 5. The Congregational Principle. Afterword. Postscript 2005 — from the Publisher

## मूढ़ बनाने का कारखाना

अनिवार्य स्कूली शिक्षा का छद्म पाठ्यक्रम

जॉन टेलर गेट्टो

2012 | 140 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-93-82400-00-4 | Rs. 200





**THE ART OF THE COMMONPLACE**  
The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry  
**WENDELL BERRY**

2012 | 360 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-4-5 | Rs. 400

*The Art of the Commonplace* is a collection of twenty one essays written by Wendell Berry, one of the best minds of our times. His essays offer an agrarian alternative to our mindless urban lives. Berry believes in healthy rural communities, sustainable agriculture, appropriate technology, hard work and frugality. These essays bring out these and many more of his beliefs in a simple and eloquent language.

Berry is against the corporate takeover of agriculture and he defends farming communities and family integrity. He believes that greed, violence, adherence to a wrong philosophy of life and simple common sense factors like the erosion of the top soil contribute to the destruction of the "good life". Anyone who introspects on "where has the simple, good life gone?" must read these essays.

**Contents :** Introduction : The Challenge of Berry's Agrarian Vision

**Part I: A Geobiography** – 1. "A Native Hill"

**Part II: Understanding Our Cultural Crisis** – 1. The Unsettling of America 3. Racism and the Economy 3. "Feminism the Body, and the Machine" 4. "Think Little"

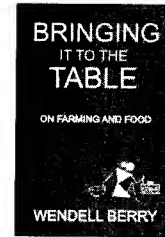
**Part III: The Agrarian Basis for an Authentic Culture** – 1. "The Body and the Earth" 2. "Men and Women in Search of Common Ground" 3. "Health Is Membership" 4. "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community" 5. "People, Land, and Community" 6. "Conservation and local Economy"

**Part IV: Agrarian Economics** – 1. "Economy and Pleasure" 2. "Two Economies" 3. "The Whole Horse" 4. "The Idea of a Local Economy" 5. "A Bad Big Idea" 6. "Solving for Pattern"

**Part V: Agrarian Religion** – 1. "The Use of Energy" 2. "The Gift of Good Land" 3. "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" 4. "The Pleasures of Eating".

Acknowledgements

**Wendell Berry** is America's most eloquent and prolific defender of traditional rural economy and small scale farming. He is the author of more than forty books. He lives and works in his native Kentucky with his wife, Tanya Berry, and their children and grand children.



**BRINGING IT TO THE TABLE**  
On Farming and Food  
**WENDELL BERRY**

2013 | 221 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-93-82400-02-8 | Rs. 400

*Bringing it the Table* is a collection of essays on farming, farmers and food. Wendell Berry was farming and writing with the purity of food in mind. For the last five decades, he has embodied mindful eating through his land practices and his writing. This collection is essential reading for all those who care about what they eat.

"Harmony between agriculture and its natural and human contexts would be health, and health was the invariable standard of Howard's work. His aim always was to treat "the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject." And Louise Howard spells this out in Sir Albert Howard in India.

A fertile soil, that is, a soil teeming with healthy life in the shape of abundant microflora and microfauna, will bear healthy plants, and these, when consumed by animals and man, will confer health on animals and man. But an infertile soil, that is, one lacking sufficient microbial, fungous, and other life, will pass on some form of deficiency to the plant, and such plant, in turn, will pass on some form of deficiency to animal and man."

WENDELL BERRY,  
from "On The Soil and Health"

**Contents :** Introduction

**Part I: Farming**– 1. Nature as Measure 2. Stupidity in Concentration 3. Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems 4. A Defense of the Family Farm 5. Let the Farm Judge 6. Energy in Agriculture 7. Conservationist and Agrarian 8. Sanitation and the Small Farm 9. Renewing Husbandry

**Part II: Farmers** – 1. Seven Amish Farms 2. A Good Farmer of the Old School 3. Charlie Fisher 4. A Talent for Necessity 5. Elmer Lapp's Place 6. On The Soil and Health 7. Agriculture from the Roots Up

**Part III: Food** – 1. Author's Note 2. From That Distant Land 3. From Hannah Coulter 4. From Andy Catlett 5. From "Misery" 6. From The Memory of Old Jack 7. From Jayber Crow 8. From Hannah Coulter 9. The Pleasures of Eating



## FREE AT LAST

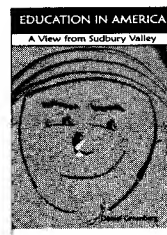
The Sudbury Valley School

DANIEL GREENBERG

2012 | 200 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-81-920957-7-6 | Rs. 300

In the late 1960's Daniel Greenberg an American physicist was looking for a child friendly school near Boston for his own children. He couldn't find one. So, a few like minded parents got together and started the Sudbury Valley School.

This book is simply written, shorn of all educational jargon. It recounts the inspiring story of this marvelous school where children can “just be”. There is no curriculum, no classes, no grades, no coercion, no uniforms, no bells and none of the rituals which define a regular school. Here children are treated as responsible citizens and they carry the burden of their own education. Unless asked, the teachers “stay away” from the children. Here children discover their own innate interests and then gallantly pursue them. And because they chose them, they also rough it out and learn them well. So, children become the true architects of their own education.



## EDUCATION IN AMERICA

A View from Sudbury Valley

DANIEL GREENBERG

2013 | 246 pages | Paperback | ISBN 978-93-82400-03-5 | Rs. 300

How does the prevailing system of schooling measure up to modern day requirements? A collection of essays addresses this question from various angles. As India is fast adopting the American model of schooling, this book is equally important for India.

"The only way the schools can become meaningful purveyors of ethical values is if they provide students and adults with real-life experiences that are bearers of moral import. Such experiences are notoriously absent from the current daily routines of schools. They include, for example, students making choices that are significant for their lives, within the school setting; choices such as how to educate themselves to be productive adults. They include students exercising judgment in consequential matters, such as school rules and discipline. I could go on at length giving examples, but the point is simple, and needs little elaboration: to teach morality to students, they must have opportunities to choose between alternative courses of action that have different ethical weight, and they must be allowed to evaluate and discuss the outcomes of these choices."